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Home. That's the theme of this month's issue of *World Soccer*, with Brazil superstar Neymar leading the way. It's probably not quite how he imagined it, it may not even be for very long, but he is back at Santos, the club where it all began.

It's a familiar story. Xherdan Shaqiri, one of 25 stars to watch that we've picked as the season's conclusion approaches, has also returned to his first club, Basel, as has Roma manager Claudio Ranieri. As long as football is played, variations of the same story will occur. The nostalgia, the romance, is simply too irresistible.

Jamie Evans, Managing Editor

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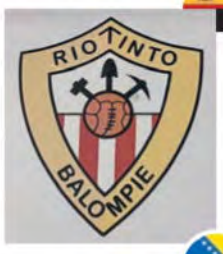

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Credit: Central Coast FC

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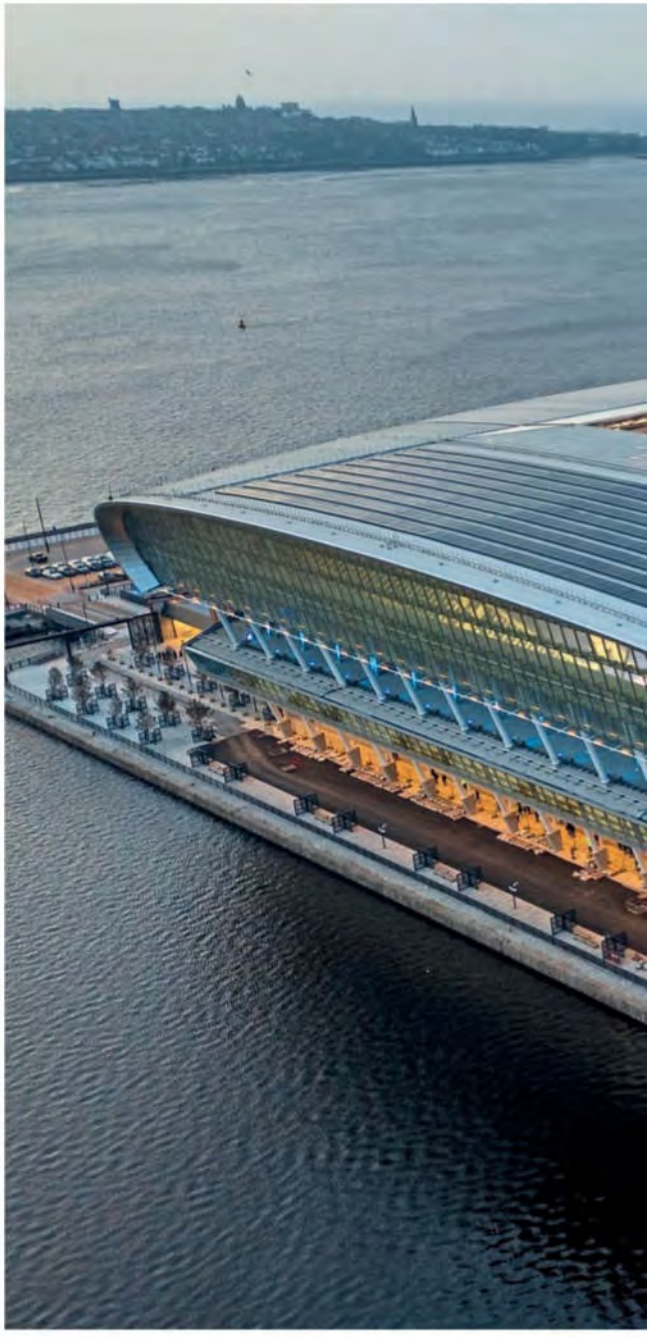

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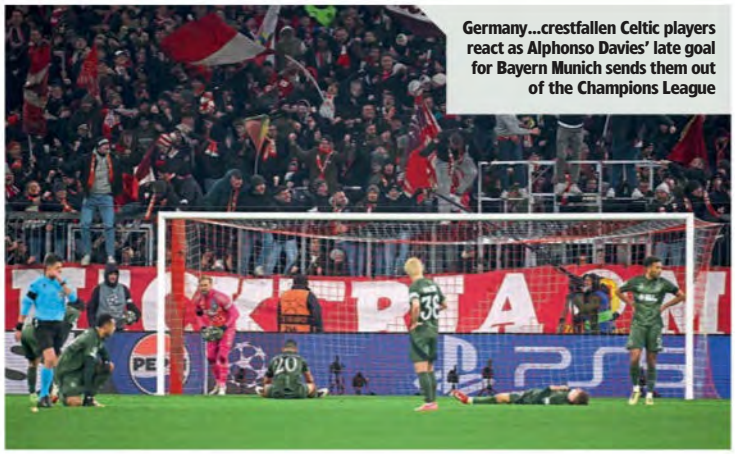

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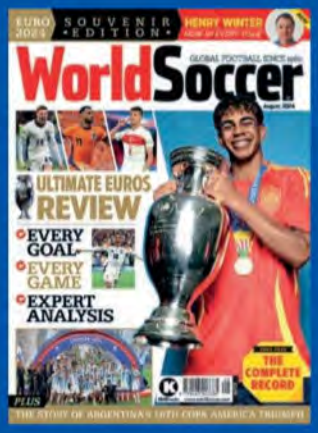

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Henry WINTER

THE VOICE OF FOOTBALL

Prescient or profligate? The Jhon Duran dilemma

Is the Colombian wasting his career chasing the Saudi riyal, or paving the way for a big future?

Instant hit...Jhon Duran celebrates scoring on his Saudi Pro League debut

An Instagram post of Jhon Duran celebrating another goal for Al Nassr inevitably drew some mocking responses. "He grew up watching this team!!!" said one. "Money will ruin your career," added another. It's no surprise. Cynicism spiced by dollar emojis will invariably follow the £64 million January signing from Aston Villa around during his time in Saudi Arabia.

A torrent of criticism chased him out of England for turning his back on the Premier League and UEFA Champions League for the money of the Saudi Pro League. As if to highlight the average quality, Duran promptly scored twice on his league debut against Al Fayha on February 7 in front of 20,207 fans at Al Awwal Park. It's no Villa Park.

A league with average attendances of a little over 8,000 is no place for an exciting 21-year-old forward who has scored against Ajax, Manchester City (twice), Liverpool (twice) and with a late winner against Bayern Munich in the Champions League. The Colombian's goals tend not to be tap-ins, more blasts from the edge of the area, or elegant lofted strikes like that of the finish over Bayern keeper Manuel Neuer. Duran was on the launchpad to the stars at Villa.

What a waste, we thought. Still do. Duran should really be lighting up the Champions League. He shouldn't be in a league where Jordan Henderson took the money, struggled with the lifestyle and quality of football, and hotfooted it back to Europe. Duran shouldn't be in a league with modest viewing figures around the world, despite being available for broadcast in 160 countries. He's joined the great unwatched. He's joined what many depict as a sportswashing project.

But take a step back, and look at it from Duran's perspective. And also the Saudis'. The wages on offer were so eye-watering – reportedly £16m tax-free a year – that Duran will have sorted out his family for generations. He also funds the Jhon Jader Duran Foundation, which provides coaching and a chance to dream for hundreds of kids in a particularly deprived part of Colombia.

Of course, we've heard this justification before, that players from impoverished backgrounds deserve the right to pursue the riches on offer in the Saudi Pro League. It doesn't convince many, given the salaries available in the Premier League.

But there is some method to what footballing purists perceive as madness. Crucially, Duran will be only 26 when his contract expires. Duran can fill his boots with goals and pockets with gold, and then resume football in a better league more in keeping with his gifts.

All the while, he will still be playing for Colombia, albeit not against the calibre of defenders that his fellow forward Luis Diaz faces with Liverpool, but at least Duran will not be over-exhausted by his league's rigours.

The key for all parties involved is his age. For the Saudis, targeting younger players like Duran represents a very clear shift in tactics, showing that they are not simply a retirement home for ageing superstars. Al Nassr were also looking at the 24-year-old Bayer Leverkusen and Nigeria striker Victor Boniface for £46m before opting for Duran, who now partners a player more than old enough to be his father. Cristiano Ronaldo is 40.

Last season the average age of Saudi Pro League signings fell from 29 years to 27.5, and the Saudis are determined to reduce it further. Al Hilal let Neymar, 33, leave after his disastrous injury-hit spell (more on page 29). Marcos Leonardo, the 21-year-old Brazilian attacker who also started out at Santos, now delights Al Hilal's fans. Leonardo joined the Riyadh club for £33m from Benfica last summer and has been rattling the goals in. If Leonardo continues to develop, and makes the Brazil senior squad, it will be further vindication to the Saudis of their new policy.

The Saudis want younger players so that the league grows with them and fulfils their ambitious aim of becoming among the top ten leagues in world football. Or, if they become impatient with the quality, their youth guarantees resale value. Al Qadsiah signed the 22-year-old Argentinian Olympic midfielder Ezequiel Fernandez from Boca Juniors. He could move one day to Europe. Part of his training programme in Buenos Aires was funded by Barcelona.

For the Saudis, targeting younger players like Duran represents a very clear shift in tactics

It's also about sustainability. The Saudis don't want to become the Chinese Super League. They have already found to their cost that luring global superstars like Neymar with lucrative deals does not always end happily. Clubs also faced substantial losses in terminating player contracts (which were down 64 per cent last year).

For the Saudis, the game plan is to be competitive hosts at the 2034 World Cup. The core of that squad will be formed by players currently in their mid-teens, who are now busily studying Ronaldo, Riyad Mahrez and Karim Benzema close up. Two of the five aims of the Saudi Pro League's PACE programme (Player Acquisition Centre of Excellence) relate to youth: to "help raise the levels of young Saudi players" and "build a generation of Saudi footballers by combining young players with international role models". Having homegrown players may also help attract more fans. "One of our own" is popular wherever.

Saudi Arabia are currently ranked 59th in the world, a place ahead of the Republic of Ireland, but have been as high as 21. They were 29th after an eye-catching USA '94. I covered them there for the *Independent* newspaper, and had the good fortune to be at RFK Stadium in Washington D.C. on June 29, 1994. It was only five minutes in when the Saudi attacker, Saeed Al Owairan, dribbled 70 yards, through Belgium's midfield and defence, before driving the ball past a stunned Michel Preud'homme. The goal was voted sixth in FIFA's Goal of the Century. More significantly, it carried Saudi Arabia through to the round of 16, the furthest they have ever been in six World Cups. To improve that record they need to develop some Durans of their own.

• **Ask Henry:** Submit your questions to Henry Winter by subscribing to our weekly newsletter at *worldsoccer.com*

A bright blue future

It's the crowd that brings a stadium to life. But it's also a well-designed stadium that brings the best out of a crowd. It's why Bramley-Moore Dock should prove such an atmospheric new home for Everton. Two years ago, I was taken around the construction site and the message was very clear: the stands to be built as close to the pitch as possible and as steep as safely possible, giving the feel that the Everton supporters were almost on top of the pitch.

The original architect, the American Dan Meis, became so obsessed with Everton fan culture that he got the club's foundation date, 1878, tattooed on his right wrist. "I am 'all in' now!" Meis posted.

New home...Everton fans outside their new stadium

When Everton fans are "all in" the new stadium next season, it really will be a sight to behold – and a sound to inspire and intimidate.

A loss to football

Paddy Barclay, the distinguished football writer who has passed away aged 77, came to my 40th birthday many years back. He didn't know anyone but he charmed everyone, even the footballing agnostics (I do know a few).

Paddy's passion was football, but he had so many other interests, particularly people. He loved meeting new people, finding out what made them tick, and if they fancied a drink at the bar. As well as a beautiful writer, he was wonderful company. Whether you knew him for four minutes or 40 years, Paddy made a huge impression. He will be greatly missed.

Keir RADNEDGE

THE INSIDER

Shifting sands of footballing power

The battle to host the 2030 World Cup final is the latest example of Europe's waning influence on the global game

World Cup final host?...a projected image of Morocco's Stade Hassan II

Growing tension over the venue for the 2030 Centenary World Cup Final illustrates the shift in the axis of world football. Europe may boast the game's most magnetic club competitions with the Champions League in the international sphere and the English Premier League at domestic level, but high-level governance is fleeing Europe at greater speed than at any time since the 1950s when FIFA fragmented into regional confederations.

Awarding the 2026 World Cup finals to Canada, Mexico and the United States was no insignificant leap in logistics, given the finals' expansion to 48 teams. But the complexities of 2030 are entirely different.

South America accepted, with bad grace, the anniversary gesture of opening matches in Montevideo, Buenos Aires and Asuncion; simultaneously Europe accepted the inclusion of Morocco to ensure no significant African opposition to Spain and Portugal. However, their patronising view of the Moroccans as junior partners, grateful for their largesse, was somewhat misguided.

A spanner thrown into the Iberian works is Morocco's proposal that their new Stade Hassan II should stage the final. This upset a European understanding envisaging the staging of world football's four-yearly showpiece in Real Madrid's redeveloped Santiago Bernabeu; the Moroccan move also revived Catalan hopes for Barcelona's own remodelled Camp Nou.

Capacity at the Bernabeu will be 82,000, Barcelona's rebuilt

home 105,000, while Moroccan officials envisage their Hassan II stadium at Benslimane, just east of Casablanca, outstripping both at 115,000. A vast "tent design" from lead architect Tarik Oualalou also features hotels, shopping centres and swimming pools. The future home of Raja and Wydad Casablanca would be the world's largest football stadium. Whether that makes long-term sense for Moroccan sport overall is another matter. No one cares about common sense when national pride is at stake.

Even Zurich's status as the capital of world football's administration is under threat, 93 years since FIFA's original move from Paris. Last May, almost unnoticed, congress approved a statute amendment easing restrictions on moving HQ.

Already the arrival of a US-centred 2026 World Cup has prompted FIFA president Gianni Infantino to relocate the legal and compliance division to Miami. The price was job losses among FIFA's resistant legal staff in Zurich, to say nothing of local law firms reliant on FIFA-linked work down the years.

Capacity at the Bernabeu will be 82,000, Barcelona's rebuilt Camp Nou home 105,000, while Moroccan officials envisage their Hassan II stadium outstripping both at 115,000

Rafael Louzan, the current president of the Royal Spanish Football Federation (RFEF), is firm in support of Madrid. Louzan, a Real Madrid fan before ascending to the supposedly neutral role of RFEF supremo in December after Luis Rubiales was sunk by the Women's World Cup "kiss" scandal, says: "I want the 2030 World Cup final to be played at the Bernabeu because it is the stadium located in the country's capital and because it also has the largest capacity."

Well, anyone can make a mistake, get the arithmetic wrong, but the argument is poor as well.

Nothing in even FIFA's ever-fluid statutes demands that the World Cup final should be staged in a national capital. Indeed, tradition suggests the opposite. Capital status applied to only two (Berlin in 2006 and Moscow 2018) of the last six showpiece venues – Yokohama in 2002, Johannesburg in 2010, Rio de Janeiro in 2014 and Lusail in 2022. Next year the 2026 final will be at the MetLife Stadium in East Rutherford, New Jersey rather than Washington D.C.

Doubtless Infantino thinks that FIFA's financial interests would be as well served by heading stateside as in staging the 2034 World Cup in oil-rich Saudi Arabia.

Not everyone is an Infantino fan. His cosying-up to US president Donald Trump has drawn as much opprobrium as his self-ingratiation towards Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. Then again, with World Cups to promote and protect in their back yards, Infantino can hardly be blamed.

For now, the FIFA president need only look ahead. If the tussle over the venue for the 2030 final is all he has to worry about, then he must be a happy man. As of now, the betting is that he would favour Madrid, not least for its transport links and accommodation, and also out of mischievous loyalty to one of his favourite disruptors: Florentino Perez. Either way, the days of the European powers expecting to be at the front of the queue for such honours appear to be in the past.

PADDY'S POWER

Patrick Barclay had a succinct assessment of colleagues which will be appreciated by long-time *World Soccer* loyalists: "There are two kinds of football writer: those who were influenced by Brian Glanville and those who should have been." Barclay, who has died aged 77, was true to his own ethos in his insightful writing for a bevy of UK "heavies" but also with noted biographies of Sir Matt Busby, Jose Mourinho and Sir Alex Ferguson. A voice to be missed.

Royal Spanish Football Federation president...Rafael Louzan after his election last December

BOOKS THIS MONTH

FOOTBALL IN WIND AND RAIN
By John Williams (Pitch Publishing, £14.99)

Football in Wind and Rain provides educational but entertaining bite-size accounts of the history of British football and its people. The voices of commentators, fans, managers and players all feature amid the succinct observations and engaging narrative stories, with topics such as fandom, stadia, great matches, law changes, memorable goals and regional differences given due coverage.

KLOPP'S LAST STAND
By Jeff Goulding (Pitch Publishing, £19.99)

Klopp's Last Stand: Red Odyssey IV continues the epic chronicle of Liverpool's history, picking up the baton from *Champions Under Lockdown* and exploring events on and off the pitch following the club's momentous Premier League title win in 2019-20. From the European Super League debacle, the agonising quadruple near miss, the horror of Paris, and building Liverpool 2.0 to Klopp's last stand, we relive it all.

Jonathan WILSON

TECHNICALLY SPEAKING

Creative tension: Haaland and Pep

The Norwegian is here to stay. How can Guardiola rebuild City around him?

Can a player who has scored 117 goals in his first 133 games for a club really be regarded as a problem? It seems ridiculous to suggest as much, particularly in the present climate in which the general mood seems to be shifting against philosophy coaches towards pragmatists. Erling Haaland scores goals and so, by a certain logic, he is a good thing. But it's also true that since he joined Manchester City they have won the treble, won the Premier League again and then gone into decline. The question is: is that coincidental? Has he simply turned up at an awkward period for the club as a generation comes to an end, or is he in some way a contributor to City's issues?

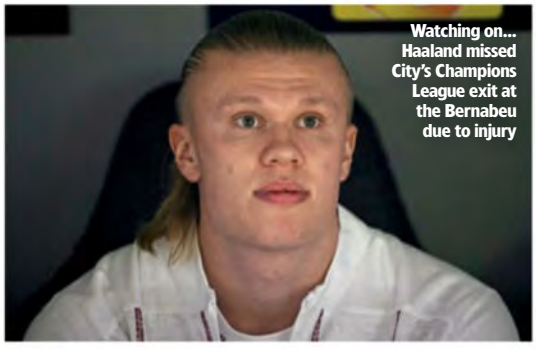
What is clearly true of Haaland is that he has forced City to change how they play. Previously Pep Guardiola has tended to prefer either a false nine or a forward like David Villa or Sergio Aguero who could function a little like a false nine, dropping away from the centre-forward's traditional zone to create space for others and to link with the midfield. Haaland either cannot or will not do that. He is, essentially, an old-fashioned number nine, albeit a spectacular example of the form, quick and strong and with a thumping shot. When City lost to Manchester United at Old Trafford in Haaland's first season, there was a moment early in the second half when, with the game stopped for an injury, Guardiola encroached a few feet onto the pitch and bellowed at Haaland to drop deeper, backing up his message with vigorous hand gestures. Haaland essentially ignored him.

Tension is not necessarily a bad thing. Indeed, Rinus Michels, whose Total Football is the Ur-text from which Guardiola's football is derived, believed in what he called the "conflict principle" of creative tension. Guardiola's instinct is to control. When he was at Barcelona he said that he wanted his team to play 15 passes when they regained possession before initiating an attack so they could set themselves to guard against a counter-attack. Haaland, though, is at his best when the ball is played forward quickly so he can use his pace against a retreating defence. Kevin De Bruyne proved very adept at playing that sort of direct pass. That combination – the team play and wariness of Guardiola on the one hand, and the brusque individuality of Haaland – won City the treble.

Creative tension... Erling Haaland and Pep Guardiola

> Has Haaland simply turned up at an awkward period for the club as a generation comes to an end, or is he in some way a contributor to City's issues?

But since then, something has gone awry. Last season still brought a league title, but this season City have collapsed almost entirely. Injuries clearly haven't helped – particularly that to Rodri – and there has been a general air of fatigue. That City felt the need to spend £170 million on four players in January was an admission that they'd made mistakes of recruitment. Perhaps Guardiola, in his 16th season managing at the highest level, is beginning to wane; a decade at the very top, as a rule



Watching on... Haaland missed City's Champions League exit at the Bernabeu due to injury

of thumb, is the limit. None of that can be blamed on Haaland.

Yet equally, the pattern is not unfamiliar. It happened with Ajax in the early 1970s: having won their first European Cup under the structures of Rinus Michels, they arguably produced even better football in lifting the trophy again in 1972 and 1973 under Stefan Kovacs. But while the freedom and self-expression the Romanian permitted them allowed them to reach new heights, their fullest flowering was also the beginning of decay. Liverpool, similarly, played far more attacking football as they won the league under Kenny Dalglish in 1987-88 than they had under Bill Shankly, Bob Paisley or Joe Fagan, but that loosening of the reins, relaxing their style by signing John Barnes, Peter Beardsley and Ray Houghton, began the process of decline.

Haaland can be seen as having helped City at last to win the Champions League, but at a price. A new element was added to the Guardiola style and, while that made them less predictable, gave them an edge and new angles, presented opponents with a more varied threat, it also meant they lost some of their control in midfield. Because Haaland does not drop deep, they had to find an extra body from somewhere, which was why John Stones was so vital, a player capable of operating as a central defender, a full-back and a midfielder. He could step up from the back four, and offer that additional figure in the centre. But he has struggled with injuries since, and there are very few players capable of replicating his role.

Guardiola is a manager who has proved highly adaptable. He has been a master of tweaking and evolving, never letting his rivals catch up. But his next development might be the toughest yet. Haaland has signed a new deal that will keep him at City until 2034. He is not leaving. So what can Guardiola do to accommodate him and his gifts while re-establishing the control he demands?

Mason MELIA

(St Patrick's Athletic)

Since making his senior debut as a 15-year-old in 2023, Melia has made a habit of breaking records. He is St Pat's youngest-ever player and scorer, the League of Ireland's youngest scorer, and now, after agreeing to join Tottenham next January for a reported fee rising to €4 million, the league's most expensive export, too.

Under ex-Republic of Ireland boss Stephen Kenny, who arrived last May, Melia has become a regular at Richmond Park. Despite his tender years – he turns 18 in September – he already has the raw physicality to compete with much older players which, combined with his burst of acceleration and neat touch, make him a handful for most LOI defenders. Spurs will be paying close attention to his progress.

Michael NOONAN
(Shamrock Rovers)
The future of Irish football seems bright, with another teenager also breaking records. Noonan's goal against Molde in the Conference League made him, at 16 years and 197 days, the competition's youngest-ever scorer.

Daniel MALDINI
(Atalanta)
The third generation of a footballing dynasty left Milan last year, but is back on an upward trajectory after joining Atalanta from Monza.

Ayden HEAVEN
(Manchester United)
The England Under-19 defender left Arsenal to join United in January, becoming the second player to make that switch in a few months following 17-year-old Chido Obi-Martin.

Callan HAMILL
(St Johnstone)
The Gunners have already moved to bolster their academy, with the 15-year-old defensive midfielder set to arrive from St Johnstone this summer for a six-figure fee.

Rio NGUMOHA
(Liverpool)
Liverpool demonstrated their faith in Ngumoha – their youngest-ever starter after his debut against Accrington Stanley in the FA Cup – by adding the 16-year-old to their Champions League squad for the knockout phase.

OBITUARIES

Hammers hero ...Ronnie Boyce

Ronnie BOYCE (1943-2025)
A one-club man from 1959 to 1972 with West Ham where he was then a long-serving member of the coaching staff and briefly caretaker manager in 1990. A hard-working inside-right, Boyce scored the winner in the FA Cup final as the Hammers won the trophy in 1964, and was a key man in the European Cup Winners' Cup win a year later.

Guy DELHASSE (1933-2025)
A goalkeeping stalwart during a 15-year career at RFC Liege, winning the Belgian title during his first season in 1952-53.

Mimis DOMAZOS (1942-2025)
One of the all-time greats of Greek football, Domazos joined Panathinaikos in 1959 at just 16 and won 13 domestic trophies with the club. He scored 134 goals in 502 league games over the next 19 years, interrupted by 18 months with AEK towards the end of his career.

"The General" captained Panathinaikos as they became the first Greek club to reach a European Cup final in their 2-0 defeat to Ajax at Wembley in 1971.

Domazos won 50 caps for Greece, scoring four goals – including one in his final international, a 3-3 draw with Australia in 1980 at 38, making him the national team's oldest scorer.

Ali GAGARIN (1949-2025)
Haydar Hassan Haj Al-Sidig Eltoum adopted the nickname of Ali Gagarin during his decade with Al Hilal of hometown Omdurman after fans compared the speed of his rise with that of Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin. Scored 19 goals in 33 games for Sudan, including at the 1970 Africa Cup of Nations which they won on home soil.

Fethi HEPER (1944-2025)
Scored 104 goals in 249 league games for Eskisehirspor between 1965 and 1974. Only won three caps for Turkey despite finishing as the league's top scorer twice, in 1970 and 1972.

Takis IKONOMOPOULOS (1943-2025)
Another member of the Panathinaikos side that reached the 1971 European Cup final, the goalkeeper played 303 league games for the club, winning five league titles and two domestic cups. His Greek league record of 1,088 minutes without conceding a goal still stands.

Antonio LIMA dos Santos (1942-2025)
Lima was a key player for Santos when they won the Intercontinental Cup and Copa Libertadores twice each in the early 1960s. His versatility was highly regarded by his team-mates, enabling him to play right-back, right-midfield and inside-right – hence his nickname of *"Curinga"*, meaning joker or wild card. He played 14 times for Brazil, including at the 1966 World Cup.

Lima joined Santos from Juventus Sao Paulo in 1961. He scored 65 goals in 696 matches, a record surpassed only by Pele, Pepe and Zito, helping Santos win six Brazilian titles, seven Sao Paulo state crowns, three Rio-Sao Paulo state championships and the South American Recopa in 1968.

After a decade with Santos, he spent four years in Mexico with Jalisco and subsequently had brief stints with Fluminense, Tampa Bay Rowdies and Portuguesa Santista.

Bob MUNRO (1942-2025)
Born in Ontario, Canada, he moved to Kenya in 1985 and set up Mathare United, a club for children in the Nairobi slums that later evolved into a top-flight club, won the league title in 2008 and competed in African club competition. Munro was pivotal in attempting to professionalise Kenyan football, often fighting a lone battle to keep up standards at the Kenyan Premier League where he served as chairman.

Jorge Nuno PINTO DA COSTA (1937-2025)
Without Pinto da Costa and his 42-year reign as president of Porto, Portuguese domestic football would be entirely different. Of the 30 league titles that the club has won, 23 came under his watch, while he also oversaw the club's only European trophies: the European Cup in 1987, UEFA Cup in 2003, Champions League in 2004 and Europa League in 2011.

He was finally ousted in last year's club presidential elections, when Andre Villas-Boas won with a landslide victory. Yet Pinto da Costa retained the support of many of the club's ultras right up until his death.

Yet another trophy ...Pinto da Costa with the Portuguese Super Cup in 2020

Ellert SCHRAM (1939-2025)
Schram enjoyed a remarkable life and career as an international footballer then director, MP, editor, writer, poet and businessman. He was captain, star forward and later honorary president of KR Reykjavik with whom he was league champion five times, between 1959 and 1968, and a cup winner on seven occasions. He was KR's captain when they played Liverpool in the Reds' first match in European competition, Iceland's Footballer of the Year four times and played 23 times for his country.

Simultaneously, he was a journalist at *Visir* (where he went on to became editor), and later was an active supporter of UEFA president Lennart Johansson's vain FIFA presidency bid in 1998.

Oscar VALDEZ (1946-2025)
One of several Argentine-born players in the 1970s who capitalised on their family background to circumvent foreign player controls to play for Spain. Valdez scored five goals in nine appearances, including one on his debut v Uruguay in 1972. He spent seven years with Valencia, winning the league in 1971, and later coached *Los Che* too, as well as Paraguay's national team.

Eduard WAUTERS (1933-2025)
Eddy Wauters played more than 200 times in defence for Antwerp, his only senior club, between 1951 and 1965. He was capped four times by Belgium and then, after retirement, was Antwerp club president for 43 years, from 1969 to 2012. Highlights of his reign were seeing the Reds win the Belgian Cup in 1992 and reaching the following season's European Cup Winners' Cup final.

Evan WILLIAMS (1943-2025)
Scottish goalkeeper who played for Wolverhampton Wanderers and Aston Villa before five years with Celtic. Williams was the Bhoys' keeper in the 2-1 defeat to Feyenoord in the 1970 European Cup final at the San Siro.

Ogun ALTIPARMAK (1938-2025)
Ex-Karsiyaka and Fenerbahce forward who scored six goals in 32 appearances for Turkey between 1961 and 1968.

John TUDOR (1946-2025)
Strike partner for Malcolm Macdonald at Newcastle in the 1970s, winning the Anglo-Italian Cup in 1973 and reaching the FA Cup final in 1974, scoring 72 goals in 219 appearances for the Magpies. He also played for Coventry City, Sheffield United, Stoke City and Gent in Belgium.

Words by Keir Radnedge & Mark Gleeson

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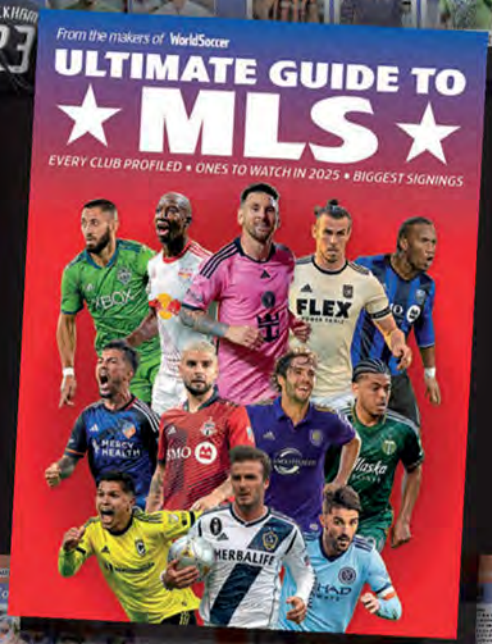
100-PAGE BOOKAZINE

As MLS embarks on its landmark 30th season, we look back on the history of the league, the stories and fans behind every club, the rivalries that define them, and the players that made MLS what it is today



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"I missed the national team, but now I am ready [to return]"

Thibaut Courtois makes himself available for international selection again after Rudi Garcia replaced Domenico Tedesco as Belgium boss. The goalkeeper hadn't played since June 2023, missing Euro 2024 as a result under the previous management

12 MOVES *you might have missed...*

TRANSFERS ★ LOANS ★ SACKINGS ★ HIRINGS ★ SWITCHES ★ RETIREMENTS

Keny ARROYO

Selected by Tim Vickery as one of *World Soccer*'s wonderkids to watch for 2025, the 19-year-old Ecuador winger joined **Besiktas** from Independiente del Valle.

Lucas PEREZ

The Spanish forward's romantic return to hometown club Deportivo La Coruna ended in January. After agreeing to leave the second-tier side, he joined **PSV** on a free.

Oday DABBAGH

Palestine's all-time top scorer, with 16 goals in 45 appearances for the West Asian nation, joined Scottish Premiership club **Aberdeen** on loan from Belgian outfit Charleroi.

Cucho HERNANDEZ

After three sparkling seasons in the US, where the Colombian won the MLS Cup and Leagues Cup, Cucho joined **Real Betis** for $16 million, a record sale for Columbus Crew.

Cristian CHIVU

A Champions League-winning player with Internazionale, who has been working in their academy since 2018, the Romanian took his first senior coaching role as **Parma** manager.

Paulo FONSECA

Just a month after being sacked by Milan, the former Lille boss headed back to France to take charge of **Lyon**. He replaced Pierre Sage, who was sacked in January.

Alessandro NESTA

Nesta was fired by **Monza** in December and then re-hired in February after his replacement, Salvatore Bocchetti, lost all but one of his seven games in charge.

Niko KOVAC

It's been all change at **Borussia Dortmund**, with ex-Bayern coach Kovac hired in February to replace Nuri Sahin. Shortly after, technical director Sven Mislintat was sacked.

Robin VAN PERSIE

Feyenoord sacked Brian Priske on the eve of their Champions League clash with Milan and, after reaching the last 16, hired Heerenveen head coach Van Persie to replace him.

Oscar IBANEZ

With **Peru** lying bottom of South America's World Cup qualifying table, they turned to their former goalkeeper of 50 caps to replace the sacked Jorge Fossati.

Habib BEYE

The former Marseille and Newcastle defender replaced Jorge Sampaoli as **Rennes** manager. Beye, who won 45 caps for Senegal, previously coached Red Star FC from 2021 to 2024.

MARCELO

The legendary former **Brazil** and Real Madrid left-back brought an end to his playing career at the age of 36, three months after leaving Fluminense by mutual consent.

"If I were to deliver a message to FIFA, I would say to avoid the afternoons, from midday to 6pm. That would massively reduce the risk of extreme heat"

Climate scientist Dr Donal Mullan, speaking to *BBC Sport*, warns of the risks players face at the 2026 World Cup in North America

The month in numbers

The facts and stats that have caught our eye in the world of football this month...

5
Japanese Super Cups won by Sanfrecce Hiroshima, one behind the record, after they beat Vissel Kobe 2-0 in the 2025 edition.

33,208
Attendance at the Aviva Stadium for February's opening-weekend Dublin derby between Bohemians and Shamrock Rovers, a record crowd for the League of Ireland.

143
Years between Queen's Park's last two wins over Rangers, after they knocked them out of the Scottish Cup. Philippe Clement was sacked as Gers manager two weeks later.

6
Premier League assists by Ederson after he set up Omar Marmoush in Manchester City's 4-0 victory over Newcastle – more than any other goalkeeper in the league's history.

€50m
Fee paid by RB Leipzig to turn Xavi Simons' loan from PSG into a permanent deal. The fee could reach up to €80m with add-ons.

Permanent deal...Xavi Simons

36
Age of PSV winger Ivan Perisic – 36 years and 17 days to be exact – when the Croatian became the oldest player in UEFA Champions League history to score in back-to-back knockout round games, helping the Dutch champions beat Juventus in the play-offs.

Dumped out... Boca players during their shock loss to Peru's Alianza Lima

2
Consecutive years Boca Juniors will spend outside the Copa Libertadores after the Argentinian giants were eliminated in the qualifying rounds.

10.18
Seconds it took for Abdoulaye Doucoure to score for Everton v Leicester City, the fourth-fastest goal in Premier League history.

84
League games that Barca Femeni went unbeaten at home, a run that spanned February 2019-February 2025, before the streak was ended by a shock 2-1 defeat to Levante.

2030
Year Jamal Musiala's new contract ties him to Bayern Munich, a deal which has been described as the biggest in German football history.

9
Players signed by Boavista in one day after the Portuguese side had a transfer ban lifted. The new arrivals included Layvin Kurzawa (ex-PSG) and Marco van Ginkel (ex-Chelsea).

$22m
Transfer fee paid to Middlesbrough by Atlanta United for Ivory Coast striker Emmanuel Latte Lath – a record signing for an MLS club.

78,742
Cross-border transfers that took place across the men and women's professional and amateur game in 2024 according to a FIFA report.

2
Nations suspended by FIFA: Congo, for third-party interference, and Pakistan who have been banned for the third time in the last decade.

22
Goals Miguel Almiron scored for Atlanta during his first spell at the club – a tally he will add to after re-joining the side from Newcastle.

17
Age of Tottenham's Mikey Moore when he scored against Elfsborg in the Europa League to become the youngest-ever English scorer in men's European competition.

Record-breaker ...Moore was aged just 17 years and 172 days

TRANSFER ROUND-UP*

£64.4m	***Jhon DURAN***	*(Aston Villa to Al Nassr)*
£49.8m	***NICO Gonzalez***	*(Porto to Manchester City)*
£26.6m	***Santiago GIMENEZ***	*(Feyenoord to Milan)*
£25.1m	***Patrick DORGU***	*(Lecce to Manchester United)*
£20.8m	***Stefanos TZIMAS***	*(Nuremberg to Brighton)*
£16m	***Marshall MUNETSI***	*(Reims to Wolverhampton Wanderers)*
Free	***WILLIAN***	*(Olympiacos to Fulham)*
Loan	***Carlos ALCARAZ***	*(Flamengo to Everton)*
Loan	***Marco ASENSIO***	*(Paris Saint-Germain to Aston Villa)*
Loan	***Ben CHILWELL***	*(Chelsea to Crystal Palace)*
Loan	***Carney CHUKWUEMEKA***	*(Chelsea to Borussia Dortmund)*
Loan	***Kevin DANSO***	*(Lens to Tottenham Hotspur)*
Loan	***Axel DISASI***	*(Chelsea to Aston Villa)*
Loan	***Joao FELIX***	*(Chelsea to Milan)*
Loan	***Evan FERGUSON***	*(Brighton to West Ham United)*
Loan	***Mario HERMOSO***	*(Roma to Bayer Leverkusen)*
Loan	***Lloyd KELLY***	*(Newcastle United to Juventus)*
Loan	***Tyrell MALACIA***	*(Manchester United to PSV)*
Loan	***Marcus RASHFORD***	*(Manchester United to Aston Villa)*
Loan	***Jeffrey SCHLUPP***	*(Crystal Palace to Celtic)*
Loan	***Andre SILVA***	*(RB Leipzig to Werder Bremen)*
Loan	***Mathys TEL***	*(Bayern Munich to Tottenham Hotspur)*
Loan	***Nicola ZALEWSKI***	*(Roma to Inter)*
Loan	***Nicolo ZANIOLO***	*(Galatasaray to Fiorentina)*

**A selection of the last-minute moves from the January transfer window*

Jim HOLDEN

AT THE HEART OF THE GAME

Never go back? Nonsense

How Claudio Ranieri has revitalised Roma in his third spell in charge of his hometown club

Never go back. That's always been the advice to football managers tempted by a return to former glories. Never go back to a previous club, however strong the sentiment, however rich the history, however loudly the supporters sing in praise. It doesn't end well.

Claudio Ranieri has been busy defying accepted wisdom at Roma this season, but then he loves proving people wrong, as he did most famously with his miracle of leading Leicester City to win the Premier League in 2015-16, arguably the single greatest managerial achievement of modern soccer.

He was also more than happy to take on the sceptics who believe you can't be a successful manager at a top club at the age of 73. "Sir Claudio", as they call him in Italy, is anything but a football dinosaur. The empathy he has with the young stars of Roma is clear evidence of that, as is the swift revival of fortunes he has inspired for his hometown team.

Roma were deep in crisis in November last year when they asked Ranieri to return, having already sacked two managers during the first few months of a season hurtling towards disaster.

Supporters were chanting with fine fury for the American owners to quit, while thousands of ultras on the *Curva Sud* stayed outside the stadium for the first 15 minutes of a big match v Inter to protest against the way the Friedkin family were running the club. Captain Lorenzo Pellegrini was also subject to intense jeering from fans as the side tumbled towards the relegation zone.

Ranieri waded into these troubled waters with his unique blend of wisdom, understated passion, smart "tinker-man" tactics, good humour and a dash of ironic nonchalance. Within a couple of months the waters in Rome were calm again, the team climbing the Serie A table, the mood of the supporters transformed, the captain re-integrated, sceptics swept to the four winds.

Never go back, huh?

This is Ranieri's third time in charge at Roma, the club he has loved since he was a boy growing up in the working-class district of Testaccio where his father was a butcher, and where the abandoned ruins of the club's first stadium still lie. In the first spell his side finished second, just behind the 2010 treble-winners of Inter coached by Jose Mourinho. The second was a holding operation for a couple of months in 2019, and now again.

Back in the capital...Ranieri oversees January's derby win v Lazio

> Roma were deep in crisis in November last year when they asked Ranieri to return

He may be in his 70s, but the enthusiasm of Ranieri remains undimmed, out on the coaching field every day in his tracksuit and woolly hat, and with his eye for a player. Perhaps the emblem of his work in the past few months is Mats Hummels, the veteran Germany defender signed last summer but ignored by the two previous head coaches, Daniele De Rossi and Ivan Juric.

Ranieri started selecting Hummels, and the player instantly became the organiser of the defence, a beacon of calm authority on the pitch to match the manager on the bench.

Why would anyone be surprised? Look at where Ranieri has worked: Juventus, Inter, Chelsea, Atletico Madrid, Valencia, Napoli, Fiorentina, Sampdoria and Monaco among others. The arrival at Roma was his 23rd different managerial appointment in 37 years of working. He now has more than 920 matches as a manager in the big five leagues of Europe – only Arsene Wenger (998) has more.

The contract to manage Roma is for this season only, and then become technical director for the next two seasons, with his first task to hire his successor. Many *Giallorossi* fans hope Ranieri will change his mind and stay another year as manager – and they will not be alone in the football world.

As for the Friedkins, they were in the process of buying Everton through all the protests in Rome. And now they are trying the same trick there with the appointment of former manager David Moyes to steer a course away from turbulence and turmoil.

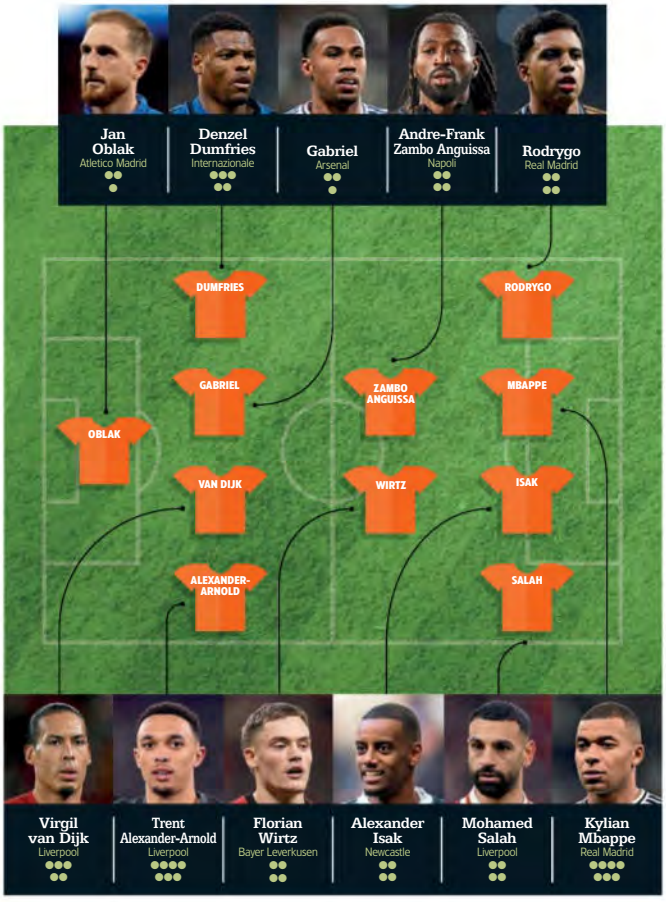
Never go back? Moyes heard that too, but couldn't resist temptation, and his early results were also encouraging. Sometimes it is possible to triumph over the curse of accepted wisdom.

ESM XI

EUROPEAN SPORTS MEDIA

JANUARY 2025

SEASON RANKINGS
Cumulative votes through the season



GOALKEEPERS

Jan Oblak (Atletico Madrid)	9
David Raya (Arsenal)	5
Matz Sels (Nottingham Forest)	4
Yann Sommer (Internazionale)	4
Alisson (Liverpool)	3
Caoimhin Kelleher (Liverpool)	3
Emiliano Martinez (Aston Villa)	3
Manuel Neuer (Bayern Munich)	3
Thibaut Courtois (Real Madrid)	2
David De Gea (Fiorentina)	2
Michele Di Gregorio (Juventus)	2
Peter Gulacsi (RB Leipzig)	2
Franco Israel (Sporting)	2
Alex Meret (Napoli)	2
Inaki Pena (Barcelona)	2
Marco Carnesecchi (Atalanta)	1
Lucas Chevalier (Lille)	1
Kepa Arrizabalaga (Bournemouth)	1
Mike Maignan (Milan)	1
Vanja Milinkovic-Savic (Torino)	1
Kevin Trapp (Eintracht Frankfurt)	1
Michael Zetterer (Werder Bremen)	1

DEFENDERS

Virgil van Dijk (Liverpool)	23
Trent Alexander-Arnold (Liverpool)	18
Federico Dimarco (Internazionale)	11
Giovanni Di Lorenzo (Napoli)	10
Gabriel (Arsenal)	8
Denzel Dumfries (Internazionale)	7
Achraf Hakimi (Paris Saint-Germain)	6
Willi Orban (RB Leipzig)	6
Alessandro Bastoni (Internazionale)	5
Alex Grimaldo (Bayer Leverkusen)	5
Antonio Rudiger (Real Madrid)	5
William Saliba (Arsenal)	5
Bremer (Juventus)	4
Riccardo Calafiori (Arsenal)	4
Jose Maria Gimenez (Atletico Madrid)	4
Josko Gvardiol (Manchester City)	4
Isak Hien (Atalanta)	4
Kim Min-jae (Bayern Munich)	4
Ibrahima Konate (Liverpool)	4
Jonathan Tah (Bayer Leverkusen)	4
Pau Cubarsi (Barcelona)	3
Ruben Dias (Manchester City)	3
Eder Militao (Real Madrid)	3
Clement Lenglet (Atletico Madrid)	3
Marcos Llorente (Atletico Madrid)	3
Andy Robertson (Liverpool)	3
Alejandro Balde (Barcelona)	2
Ramy Bensebaini (Borussia Dortmund)	2
Conor Bradley (Liverpool)	2
Alessandro Buongiorno (Napoli)	2
Dani Carvajal (Real Madrid)	2
Marc Cucurella (Chelsea)	2
Alphonso Davies (Bayern Munich)	2
Lucas Digne (Aston Villa)	2
Theo Hernandez (Milan)	2
Dean Huijsen (Bournemouth)	2
Sead Kolasinac (Atalanta)	2
Inigo Martinez (Barcelona)	2
Nuno Mendes (Paris Saint-Germain)	2
Dani Vivian (Athletic Club)	2
Ola Aina (Nottingham Forest)	1
Juan Cabal (Juventus)	1
Andrea Cambiaso (Juventus)	1
Stefan de Vrij (Internazionale)	1
Ousmane Diomande (Sporting)	1
Dodo (Fiorentina)	1
Federico Gatti (Juventus)	1
Robin Gosens (Fiorentina)	1
Raphael Guerreiro (Bayern Munich)	1
Caio Henrique (Monaco)	1
Juan Jesus (Napoli)	1
Dominik Kohr (Mainz)	1
Jules Kounde (Barcelona)	1
Ferland Mendy (Real Madrid)	1
Nikola Milenkovic (Nottingham Forest)	1
Murillo (Nottingham Forest)	1
Pedro Porro (Tottenham Hotspur)	1
David Raum (RB Leipzig)	1
Amir Rrahmani (Napoli)	1
Nico Schlotterbeck (Borussia Dortmund)	1
John Stones (Manchester City)	1
Nicolas Tagliafico (Lyon)	1
Edmond Tapsoba (Bayer Leverkusen)	1
Jurrien Timber (Arsenal)	1
Pau Torres (Aston Villa)	1

MIDFIELDERS

Cole Palmer (Chelsea)	17
Florian Wirtz (Bayer Leverkusen)	16
Jamal Musiala (Bayern Munich)	11
Ryan Gravenberch (Liverpool)	10
Jude Bellingham (Real Madrid)	7
Charles De Ketelaere (Atalanta)	6
Joshua Kimmich (Bayern Munich)	6
Rodrigo De Paul (Atletico Madrid)	5
Federico Valverde (Real Madrid)	5
Michael Olise (Bayern Munich)	4
Pedri (Barcelona)	4
Andre-Frank Zambo Anguissa (Napoli)	4
Phil Foden (Manchester City)	3
Martin Odegaard (Arsenal)	3
Tijjani Reijnders (Milan)	3
Declan Rice (Arsenal)	3
Marc Casado (Barcelona)	2
Marten de Roon (Atalanta)	2
Davide Frattesi (Internazionale)	2
Giovani Lo Celso (Real Betis)	2
Scott McTominay (Napoli)	2
Adrien Rabiot (Marseille)	2
Dominik Szoboszlai (Liverpool)	2
Nicolo Barella (Internazionale)	1
Moises Caicedo (Chelsea)	1
Hakan Calhanoglu (Internazionale)	1
Angel Di Maria (Benfica)	1
Fermin Lopez (Barcelona)	1
Enzo Fernandez (Chelsea)	1
Morgan Gibbs-White (Nottingham Forest)	1
Leon Goretzka (Bayern Munich)	1
Bruno Guimaraes (Newcastle United)	1
Morten Hjulmand (Sporting)	1
Pierre-Emile Hojbjerg (Marseille)	1
Ardon Jashari (Club Brugge)	1
Stanislav Lobotka (Napoli)	1
Alexis Mac Allister (Liverpool)	1
James Maddison (Tottenham Hotspur)	1
Henrikh Mkhitaryan (Internazionale)	1
Joao Neves (Paris Saint-Germain)	1
Matheus Nunes (Manchester City)	1
Dani Olmo (Barcelona)	1
Aleksandar Pavlovic (Bayern Munich)	1
Rodri (Manchester City)	1
Bernardo Silva (Manchester City)	1
Malik Tillman (PSV)	1
Lucas Torreira (Galatasaray)	1
Hans Vanaken (Club Brugge)	1
Joey Veerman (PSV)	1
Granit Xhaka (Bayer Leverkusen)	1
Piotr Zielinski (Internazionale)	1

FORWARDS

Mohamed Salah (Liverpool)	25
Robert Lewandowski (Barcelona)	21
Harry Kane (Bayern Munich)	17
Kylian Mbappe (Real Madrid)	12
Erling Haaland (Manchester City)	11
Raphinha (Barcelona)	11
Lamine Yamal (Barcelona)	9
Viktor Gyokeres (Sporting)	8
Omar Marmoush (Manchester City)	8
Alexander Isak (Newcastle United)	7
Vinicius Junior (Real Madrid)	6
Antoine Griezmann (Atletico Madrid)	5
Ousmane Dembele (Paris Saint-Germain)	4
Cody Gakpo (Liverpool)	4
Khvicha Kvaratskhelia (Paris Saint-Germain)	4
Ademola Lookman (Atalanta)	4
Rodrygo (Real Madrid)	4
Kerem Akturkoglu (Benfica)	3
Bradley Barcola (Paris Saint-Germain)	3
Lautaro Martinez (Internazionale)	3
Mateo Retegui (Atalanta)	3
Bukayo Saka (Arsenal)	3
Justin Kluivert (Bournemouth)	2
Samu Aghehowa (Porto)	1
Jamie Gittens (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Kai Havertz (Arsenal)	1
Joao Pedro (Brighton & Hove Albion)	1
Lois Openda (RB Leipzig)	1
Christian Pulisic (Milan)	1
Leroy Sane (Bayern Munich)	1
Patrik Schick (Bayer Leverkusen)	1
Giuliano Simeone (Atletico Madrid)	1
Alexander Sorloth (Atletico Madrid)	1
Marcus Thuram (Internazionale)	1

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eye witness

Tim Vickery reports

Returning to his roots... Neymar once again in the colours of Santos

BRAZIL

The return of the king

Neymar re-joining Santos is the biggest return to Brazilian football in exactly 30 years, since Romario turned his back on Barcelona at the start of 1995 and signed for Flamengo. True, in the following three decades both Ronaldo and Ronaldinho went back home. Both, of course, were huge stars, and they had their moments in Brazil. But it was generally accepted that their best days were behind them. That was not the case with Romario, who was just turning 29 when he came back across the Atlantic.

Just a few months earlier, he had been the star name in Brazil's USA '94 World Cup triumph and had just won the FIFA World Player of the Year award. Theoretically, then, he was at the peak of his powers, although in reality his level of motivation was variable and his displays of genius sporadic. But he had climbed the twin peaks and set the measure by which the career of Neymar has always been judged. World Player of the Year awards would now seem to be a long shot, but there is a genuine hope that Neymar can step back into the Brazil side and have one last successful crack at the World Cup next year.

But Neymar is older than Romario was at the time. He turned 33 on the day that he made his debut in this second spell with the club where it all started. And he has an alarming injury record, with very little football behind him since suffering a serious knee problem playing for Brazil back in October of 2023.

As a footballer, then, he starts his time with Santos as an unknown quantity. He was greeted with a long, elaborate and well-organised party at the tight, little stadium of Santos, within sight of the mausoleum where Pele lies. Until he sorts himself out with a house in the area, he travels to work each day in a helicopter that picks him up at his mansion on the Rio de Janeiro coast. There is a massive media circus around him and his every move. But there is a question at the heart of what promises to be one of the global game's most interesting storylines over the next few months: is he capable of meeting the expectations? Can the 2025 model

The Neymar effect...Santos supporters gather in their thousands to witness Neymar's unveiling

Number ten again...inside the Santos club shop

Neymar continue to tip the balance at the highest level?

The move back to his boyhood club happened earlier than expected – and not because Neymar initially wanted it that way. Santos made no secret of their desire to bring him back. For the first time in their history, the club spent 2024 in the second division. The number ten shirt was retired while they were out of the top flight, a tribute to Pele made by the club president Marcelo Teixeira. "We will be back in the top division but, until then, we won't wear our most glorious shirt," he declared shortly after his re-election in December 2023.

Santos has always been a miracle. The city port that grew as an exporter of coffee has a population under half a million – small by Brazilian standards. All the other major Brazilian clubs are from the state capital but Santos, down the hill from the sprawl of Sao Paulo, are an exception. And yet, during the Pele years in the 1950s and 1960s, this little club with a tiny stadium were able to outperform the giants of the metropolis, and even earn the right to call themselves the best club side in the world.

Is he capable of meeting the expectations? Can the 2025 model Neymar continue to tip the balance at the highest level?

Post-Pele they inevitably slipped back, only to catch the headlines again in the current century with some excellent youth development work. Neymar, of course, is the most distinguished recent graduate. But as financial distances opened up in Brazil, it was inevitable that they would struggle, hence the relegation at the end of 2023. Once their first-division status had been restored, it was an obvious move to try to bring Neymar back – with the promise of quality on the field and the guarantee of much needed extra income and attention.

But Neymar's stated aim was to stay with Al Hilal for the last six months of his contract, and then use FIFA's new Club World Cup as a giant billboard to announce his continued existence and widen the range of options for the next move. The bombshell in January was that the Saudi Arabian club made it clear that they no longer wanted him. Portuguese head coach Jorge Jesus explained that they could register

Return of the king... a mural of Neymar is painted in Santos

ten foreign players for the local league and, still trying to shake off his injury problems, Neymar was not among them. He was, according to his coach, not able to accompany the rhythm of the others in training.

The door, then, was open for Santos to make their move, and get enough sponsors on board to finance the deal. Neymar was hurt by the comments of Jorge Jesus. Once he was back at Santos he was keen to stress that his performances in training had been fine. The coach responded with the view that not being able to get the best out of Neymar was one of his big regrets – a curious declaration, because it would seem to make no sense. Jorge Jesus did not fail with Neymar for the very good reason that he was unable to work with Neymar. After that injury in October 2023, Neymar was out for just over a year, and soon after coming back (and predictably enough after such a long lay-off) he went down with a muscular problem.

Second Santos debut...Neymar acknowledges the crowd just before coming on against Botafogo

One possible interpretation is that Jorge Jesus is trying to keep the door open for a possible future collaboration – which could take place in the Brazil national team. The coach had a magical time with Flamengo in 2019, and would be a popular choice to replace Dorival Junior if results in World Cup qualification do not improve. Presumably, then, Jorge Jesus sees Neymar as potentially still able to shine at the top level. This begs two questions. Firstly, might it be the

Neymar will be striving to show that there are plenty of exciting chapters still to be written in his story. But why has he only signed for six months?

case that the main reason Al Hilal were keen to offload their Brazilian star was because they are making space for another big-name acquisition? And secondly, will a 34-year-old injury-hit player really be capable of carrying Brazil to 2026 World Cup glory?

The early evidence, predictably, has been inconclusive. Neymar has moved from one Portuguese coach to another, with the much-travelled Pedro Caixinha currently in charge at Santos. Quite rightly, the coach has pointed out that it will take time for his number ten to acquire match fitness. Neymar made his second debut off the bench, coming on at half-time in a 1-1 draw at home to Botafogo in the Campeonato Paulista, then started the following two games versus Novorizontino (0-0) and Corinthians (a 2-1 defeat), before getting off the mark with a penalty in a 3-1 home win against Agua Santa.

But there is a more fundamental question. Age and injuries take their toll. Will Neymar be able to adjust his game in accordance with his current circumstances?

Previous Brazil boss Tite used to describe Neymar as both bow and arrow. The probability now is that Brazil's all-time top scorer will have to be more of the former. When he was injured he was already operating in a deeper role for Brazil, looking to direct operations and slip through passes for the likes of Vinicius Junior. This would seem to be the future – central midfield is a zone of the pitch where Brazil have been

ABOVE: Welcome home...Santos club president Marcelo Teixeira presents Neymar to the press

Career high...Neymar celebrates winning the 2011 Copa Libertadores

Then and now...Neymar during his first spell at Santos and on his return

struggling – but it will mean dwelling less on the ball, playing quicker. Holding onto possession in deep zones looking to draw fouls is unlikely to do much good either to him or the team.

And so, for the next few months, Neymar will be striving to show that there are plenty of exciting chapters still to be written in his story. But why has he only signed for six months? It is surely far-fetched to believe that by the end of June he will have done enough to prove himself worthy of investment by a major European club, for example. And if the priority really is the 2026 World Cup, then it would make sense to stay with Santos up until the finals. He is no longer 11th in line for one of ten spots. At Santos he will be the number one priority, and the club will give him every opportunity to prove his form and fitness.

But Neymar's current capacity is not the only unknown factor in the equation. There is also the future of Santos. Brazilian clubs, of course, can now have owners, and it is entirely possible that Santos will soon go through this process and transform themselves into a business. Should that happen, it could be that Neymar's commercially-minded father might be part of the mix. A six-month contract gives all concerned the flexibility to respond to events on and off the field.

In the meantime, then, Neymar is back in the famous white shirt. Taking Santos to triumph in the 2011 Copa Libertadores – the first time they had won the trophy since 1963 – still ranks as one of the outstanding achievements of his career. What is he capable of now, in his second spell? Is he the knight in shining armour, ready to save the nation from another four years without a World Cup win? Or is he more like a footballing *El Cid*, tied to his horse and sent out to raise morale when the capacity to do battle has gone? Watch this space, because whatever happens it is going to be fascinating.

A costly mistake or bad luck story?

Either way, Neymar's move to Al Hilal proved to be a failure for club and player

Exciting times... Neymar during his unveiling in Riyadh

Most of the big signings in the Saudi Pro League have gone at least reasonably well but there is one glaring exception. Neymar joined Al Hilal from Paris Saint-Germain in the summer of 2023 for a reported fee of around €90 million. The Brazilian followed the likes of Cristiano Ronaldo, Karim Benzema, Riyad Mahrez and others to join the big Riyadh and Jeddah clubs.

Arriving injured, it took a few weeks for the star to make his debut. By October, it looked as if he was starting to settle and a first goal came in the AFC Champions League. But then came that cruciate ligament injury sustained while on international duty for Brazil against Uruguay.

Fans back in Riyadh were devastated to see their biggest star being stretchered off in South America but, in truth, the Blues were perfectly fine without Neymar. Aleksandar Mitrovic banged in the goals while Ruben Neves marshalled the midfield in front of a tight defence. They strolled to a 19th league title and set a new world-record winning streak of 34 games along the way. No wonder then that coach Jorge Jesus did not seem that interested in talking about Neymar's return during his lengthy recovery.

Initially, he was expected to be back by August, just in time for the start of the Saudi Pro League season. But he wasn't registered for the league squad, with his place (each team is allowed ten foreign players) taken by Marcos Leonardo, another Santos old boy.

Neymar was allowed to play in Asia and when he did return to fitness, it was in the AFC Champions League. In October, a year after the injury, he made two appearances off the bench. The second came against Esteghlal of Iran when he was full of his old tricks, flicks and turns. But then, just before the end, he pulled up in the area when stretching for the ball.

That meant there was no hope of being registered for the second half of the Saudi season, from January to May. With Neymar's contract ending in the summer anyway, questions about whether he would leave were not far away. Jorge Jesus heightened speculation in January when he said: "The Saudi Pro League is one of the best leagues in the world. Neymar can no longer play at the level we are used to," though the coach would later soften this stance.

Soon after, the negotiations were done and Brazil's record scorer was free to return to Santos. The reaction among Al Hilal supporters was one of disappointment rather than anger. Due to bad luck, they never really got to see Neymar, he had become a distraction for the club and it was best for all that he left.

John Duerden

A sad ending...Neymar pulls up in his final game for Al Hilal

eyewitness

Henry Flynn reports

SPAIN

The cradle of Spanish football

Spanish football is a rich and vibrant tapestry: the grandeur of *El Clasico* giants Real Madrid and Barcelona, a plethora of academies producing glittering talent, and a reinvigorated national team boasting a European Championship trophy. All of that and more can be traced back to a small town in the province of Huelva, Andalusia.

Minas de Riotinto does not stick out on a map of Spain. It takes its name from the mines over which the town hangs and the river, dyed red by minerals, which runs through it. The landscape surrounding the town is

Historic club... Riotinto Balompie

Minas de Riotinto... Europe's largest open-pit mine

otherworldly. Indeed, its likeness to a Martian terrain has seen it used as a filming location in a number of sci-fi movies, and its extreme acidic conditions have been studied by NASA's astrobiologists.

The nearest big cities are not exactly in different galaxies, but infrequent bus services to and from Huelva and Seville make visiting without a car tricky. Home to around 4,000 people, the town has a timeless, low-key vibe: cottage-like areas, a few eateries, and pale walls enveloping a sports pitch.

Approaching the ground, everything seems unremarkable. But the name of the stadium offers a clue to its important history: Estadio Municipal Cuna del Futbol Espanol – the Cradle of Spanish Football Stadium. Outside, a monument stands proud and lonely in the chilly evening air bearing the same moniker. Just a few feet away is an inscription, installed in 2023, marking 150 years since the first football game played on Spanish soil.

Once through the door, there are concrete terraces – mainly scruffy steps but for a small seating area and an abandoned stand flanking an artificial grass surface of white and yellow lines. Gradually, as the home fans gather to watch the game against regional neighbours Moguer, the ground where everything began comes alive.

With the visitors sitting atop the seventh-tier Primera Andaluza division, Riotinto Balompie go into the game as underdogs. Yet the hosts make up for their lack of on-field quality with desire: over the course of 90 minutes, a home player crunches into and breaks a corner flag to keep a ball in play, a team-mate puts his body on the line to block a fierce shot, the goalkeeper makes a save from point-blank range, and a fracas breaks out between a posse of away fans and a coach.

At the end of it all, Riotinto score in the last breath of the game to cancel out a late Moguer goal, sending the supporters into raptures near the old-school dressing rooms. For the goalscorer, forward Abel Gonzalez, it is particularly joyous.

"I'm from the town. The club is historic, and I like that a lot," he says, fresh after scrambling home the

The cradle of Spanish football...a monument to Spain's footballing history

Team photo... Riotinto Balompie's squad from 1919

equaliser. "I've spent many years here. We have a family here. We are all team-mates. We're all friends off the pitch – almost always together. It's one of the best teams I've seen in being so much like a family. So, I'm happy here."

Watching on, as always, is lifelong supporter Rafael Cortes. Now in his 80s, he still photographs the line-ups before matches, and his knowledge remains as sharp as a blade. When asked when football was first played here, he says, in a quivering voice: "1873".

Recreativo de Huelva, formed in 1889, is the oldest football club in Spain, and their meeting with Sevilla in 1890 is recognised as the country's first official football match. Yet it was here, an hour's drive inland, where the first informal knockabout games were played almost 20 years earlier.

Football's history in the area is unmistakably connected to the nearby mines. The date that Cortes refers to is when the British arrived to set up the Rio Tinto Company and exploit the red earth teeming with minerals. Soon, the settlers introduced workshops, living spaces and transport links, bringing wealth to the area. Having played back home, football was one of the natural pastimes, so they improvised small-sided games with makeshift balls and rocks for goalposts. Initially, the Spaniards looked on with bewilderment and curiosity. But the game soon caught on.

The Club Ingles Bella Vista, just a stone's throw from the football ground, has been there since 1878. Founded by John Sutherland Mackay, a Scottish medical doctor employed by the Rio Tinto Company, it was there that Rio Tinto FC played. Those early, informal games were never officially recognised or recorded, which is why Recreativo claim the title of Spain's first club. But there is an indelible link between the two teams: Mackay's younger brother William co-founded Recreativo.

Rio Tinto FC continued until 1932 when it merged with Riotinto Balompie, which had been formed by locals in 1914, and that is the club that still exists today.

Across its existence, Riotinto Balompie have mainly competed near the base of the nation's football pyramid, with three seasons in the third tier the pinnacle. In terms of optimism, there is a sense of "*manque pierda*" ("even when they lose"), the term that Real Betis followers use to express their loyalty to the team.

Indeed, although Riotinto sit respectably in the upper half of the Primera Andaluza, the prospect of climbing the ranks and one day featuring in the Copa del Rey – only teams from the sixth tier or above can qualify for the national cup – is unimaginable for club president Jose Real.

"It's my hobby," he says. "I played for 20 years in Riotinto, including 15 here, and retired at 35. It's my home, and I will defend it until the death. To know I'm defending the cradle of football...

The name of the stadium offers a clue to its important history: Estadio Municipal Cuna del Futbol Espanol – the Cradle of Spanish Football Stadium

Pre-match...the captains of Riotinto Balompie and Moguer before kick-off

Corner...players wait for a delivery into the box

Homecoming hero...ex-Sevilla forward Jose Carlos

Lifelong member...Rafael Cortes

Of course, we'd like to play in a division above, but it's impossible."

Simply getting around Andalusia to play away games is enough of a challenge, both economically and logistically, and the club needs investment in the facilities and the playing squad in order to progress.

"The field over there isn't great, I don't know if you realised," admits Real. "The stand behind the goal is falling apart. We are trying to fix it with the council. But it's political."

How well the mining industry fares economically has some bearing on Riotinto's fortunes. Just as in the early days of Rio Tinto FC, some members of the current squad work in the mines alongside their playing commitments.

Take the Corta Atalaya, which, at least temporarily, closed active operations in the mid-1990s. A sight to behold, it has the potential to be a notable landmark for visitors but is not set up to generate money from tourism right now. Catching the best glimpse without organising a trip means climbing over some wire fencing after plotting your way there.

The financial realities and imbalances within the league make like difficult for the club's head coach, Vicente Oliva.

"Our team doesn't earn money from football. But the side we faced, Moguer, do have a football salary," he says. "Each [player] has work or studies, so they sometimes can't play. I can rarely count on the whole team being there for training [three times a week] because one is in Sevilla and another over in Huelva.

"Because of this, there is a big handicap when preparing the games.

But at least in terms of giving everything, the motivation and courage, they do it. There is merit – that we can compete against every team."

The players honour their early origins by playing intense attritional football, as Oliva outlines: "Training carries the essence of football brought by the English. We have the pitch, old as you see. And it holds this memory of the first years of football.

"They live [football] very intensely, and the crowd help a lot. The love of football is ingrained in them."

Located so far from the major cities, Riotinto is not the easiest place for aspiring youngsters to get noticed. But just a few miles down the road, in even smaller El Campillo, Barcelona attacking midfielder Fermin Lopez started his trajectory, transferring to Recreativo and Betis as a kid before progressing through the ranks at *La Masia*.

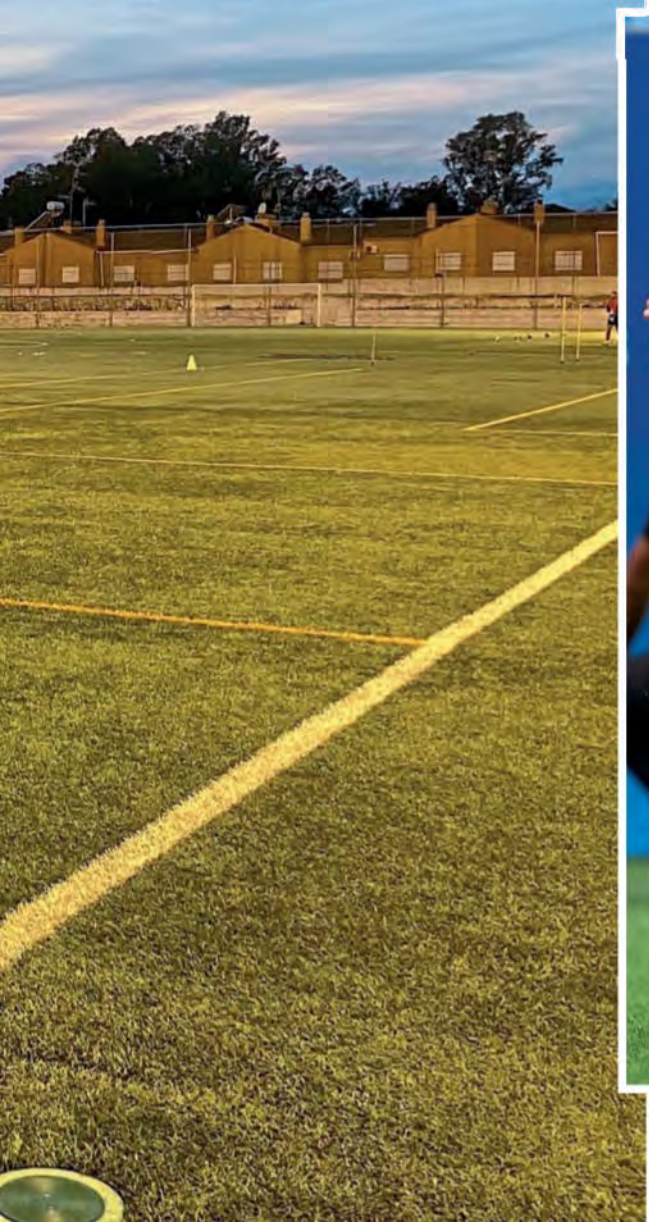
Since then, he's been a livewire for Barcelona, where he's contracted until 2029 and has a €500 million release clause. He was also the protagonist of Spain's gold-medal-winning campaign at the Paris Olympics in 2024, racking up an impressive six goals in the tournament, including two in the final.

"More or less everyone [here] knows him," adds Oliva, which is unsurprising given there's a Bar Fermin in El Campillo, supposedly named after their famous son. "The people love him a lot and are very welcoming to him."

On the other end of the career scale, there's 37-year-old attacker Jose Carlos, born in Riotinto and now back again after a career representing Sevilla and Rayo Vallecano in La Liga, either side of a stint at Greek side AEK Athens. Stationed on the bench at first, he's very much one of them.

Riotinto, where it all began, has mostly been left behind by the rest of Spanish football, and unless a massive influx of outside cash suddenly arrives, they are unlikely to ever catch up. But with the town's identity literally etched into the surrounding areas, and people like Carlos and Cortes reminding of the history, it's importance to the national game will not be forgotten.

> "It's my home, and I will defend it until the death. To know I'm defending the cradle of football...Of course, we'd like to play in a division above, but it's impossible"
>
> Riotinto Balompie club president Jose Real



Pitchside view ...the Estadio Municipal Cuna del Futbol Espanol

Local lad...Barcelona and Spain attacking midfielder Fermin Lopez grew up just down the road

eye witness

Anthony Tomas reports

SERBIA

Power struggles in Belgrade

Power struggle...Partizan and OFK players compete for the ball during February's derby clash
Credit: FK Partizan Belgrade

The brutalist, concrete exterior of the Partizan Stadium seamlessly matches the atmosphere on a grey mid-February afternoon in south Belgrade. Flecks of snow and a sense of tension are in the air.

For once in this passionate sporting city, it is not football causing the tension. Since a tragedy in Serbia's second city, Novi Sad, in November, student-led protests have become a daily occurrence, the likes of which have not been seen for a generation.

With agitation bubbling away under the city's surface, the last thing it needs is a Belgrade derby between two of the country's most storied clubs. But that is exactly what this afternoon has in store mere days after violent clashes between rival sets of fans hit the headlines.

Today, however, Partizan will not be welcoming Red Star, the other half of the "Eternal Derby", in one of football's fiercest rivalries. Instead, the pocket of vocal away supporters is bedecked in blue and white, the colours of OFK Belgrade.

Omladinski Fudbalski Klub Beograd (Youth Football Club of Belgrade) may be the new kids on the Serbian SuperLiga block, having secured promotion last season, but they are not the fledglings their name suggests. The Romantics' name carries real weight in the region's history. Founded in 1911, OFK won five Yugoslav First League titles and two Yugoslav Cups between 1931 and 1941. Further cup triumphs and consistent league performances led to many European exploits – none better than a UEFA Cup Winners' Cup semi-final appearance in 1962-63, which they lost to Tottenham Hotspur.

A Yugoslav Cup three years later – their last major honour – and a UEFA Cup quarter-final in 1973 proved to be the end of their peak years, and they spent the following decades yo-yoing between the first and second tiers of Yugoslavian and then Serbian football.

Their last SuperLiga relegation, in 2016, was followed by dropping to the third tier a year later. Fan groups rallied to save the cash-stricken club from

Eternal rivals...Red Star's Timi Elsnik tussles with Aldo Kalulu of Partizan

extinction during six dark seasons in the Belgrade league, and prevailed. The club got back on its feet, rising up the divisions as quickly as it had fallen, securing back-to-back promotions to where it believes it belongs: taking on teams like Partizan as equals.

However, as with any romantic story, nothing is ever straightforward.

Rewind to one week earlier, and OFK have a home match against mid-table Napredak. But the working-class neighbourhood of Karaburma is quiet and its Omladinski Stadion is empty, with its tired, dilapidated terraces on full display. This match, as with all OFK home games this season, is being played a three-hour drive away in Zajecar, near the Bulgarian border. The aforementioned terraces are the reason – the stadium was deemed unfit to host Serbian SuperLiga matches.

Before you spare a thought for the hardy OFK fans making the fortnightly six-hour round trip, there is no need: a season-long boycott of all "home" matches is in full swing, in protest against the decision.

Stadion Kraljevica in Zajecar, opened in 2023, is one of a number of modest but impressive new grounds that have popped up across Serbia at significant cost in recent years. The town's club is nowhere near the top flight, so the chance to draw crowds for a season and recoup some costs was too good an opportunity for the authorities to turn down. Not that they have achieved the desired results, with handfuls of away fans and few semi-interested neutrals the only attendees.

Renovations to the Omladinski

are supposed to be ready for an OFK homecoming in 2025-26, but little work appears to have been done. A few minutes before kick-off, one young fan turns up anyway. He gets out of his car with a can of blue spray paint in hand, repaints the OFK badge adorning the entrance which had recently been desecrated with black graffiti, and drives off again. At least someone is doing their bit for the upkeep of their team's home.

The Zajecar relocation did little to spoil the fairy-tale return when the season began – Simo Krunic's side lost just twice in their first seven SuperLiga games before the visit of Partizan in mid-September. A 96th-minute Filip Stojilkovic winner secured a dramatic 3-2 win to stun the travelling fans.

But did Stojilkovic's scruffy finish represent more than just three points and local pride? For OFK, it fuelled a six-match unbeaten run that took them to the dizzying heights of second in the table, behind Red Star. For Partizan, it was the latest sorry chapter in a dismal 2024.

Last season, the Black-Whites had looked set to break Red Star's monopoly on the SuperLiga title until a spectacular collapse allowed their nemesis to win a seventh successive crown at a canter.

Unstoppable... Red Star are on course for their eighth consecutive SuperLiga title

In the summer, it was Partizan supporters filling the streets in protest against the club's owners. Elimination in the qualifying rounds of all three UEFA competitions (a heavy aggregate defeat to Dynamo Kyiv, followed by narrow losses to Lugano and Gent) meant much-needed cash was missed out on. A week after the OFK loss they suffered a 4-0 defeat to Red Star, their biggest of the 21st century. Angered fans had seen enough – the home dressing room was broken into and head coach Aleksandar Stanojevic was attacked and injured. He promptly resigned.

The 1966 European Cup finalists were sitting ninth in the table, staring into the abyss of financial ruin and simultaneously looking up at OFK who had taken their place as Red Star's nearest challengers in the city. Which begged the question, was the struggle for power in Belgrade shifting?

"Struggle" being the operative word. Visitors with no more than a passing interest would be forgiven for thinking Red Star were Belgrade's only club. Ask a Belgrader who they support and they'll say "Red Star" in a tone that suggests no other answer exists. With title after title fuelling UEFA Champions League qualification year after year and the increased riches that go with it, the gap is only widening between them and the rest, who struggle for the best view of their distant coattails

BELOW: Belgrade's second derby...OFK and Partizan players shake hands before their meeting *Credit: FK Partizan Belgrade*

Jostling for position ...OFK and Partizan are both aiming to challenge Red Star
Credit: FK Partizan Belgrade

With title after title fuelling UEFA Champions League qualification year after year and the increased riches that go with it, the gap is only widening between Red Star and the rest

Inevitably, it was Red Star who played a role in OFK's wheels coming off when they visited Zajecar in November. Stefan Lekovic's second-half goal gave Red Star all three points and thoroughly burst the OFK bubble; beginning a run of just one win in six before the winter break. The chance to reset had little impact – the return to action at the start of February began with 2-0 losses to Radnicki and Napredak.

The OFK fall almost perfectly coincided with a change in fortunes at Partizan – October saw fans' prayers answered with the announcement of a new club president, while first Savo Milosevic then Marko Jovanovic oversaw improvements on the pitch, before a fourth coach of the campaign, Srdjan Blagojevic, took over in the New Year.

This turbulence, this jostling for position, provides the backdrop for February's meeting. Partizan come into the home clash with OFK having lost just once in 15 league games since the Red Star thrashing, climbing up to second in the standings.

From kick-off, Partizan look determined to justify their status as favourites for the game and gain revenge on the upstarts. Three minutes in, the OFK defence caves and Aldo Kalulu breaks the deadlock. Ten minutes later, the visitors' Miljan Momcilovic blocks a goal-bound effort with his hand and is sent off. Bibars Natcho converts the spot-kick and the game is already over as a contest. Partizan run out 4-1 winners, inflicting OFK's heaviest defeat yet this campaign. Inclement weather is a contributor to the sparse crowd, but adds insult to injury for OFK – not considered proper derby material by Partizan fans, who have eyes on a greater prize a week later.

As with the reverse fixtures, Partizan follow the meeting with OFK with the Eternal Derby. The pyrotechnic-heavy Rajko Mitic Stadium is as hostile as ever, but Partizan don't need a crazed atmosphere to feel intimidated – no victories in their last ten visits here is enough. However, they silence the crowd after eight minutes when Ibrahim Zubairu gives them the lead. Red Star pressure finally tells in the first minute of the second half as Cherif Ndiaye equalises before he adds a second five minutes later to restore modern-day order. A bullet header from Stefan Kovac levels the scores again, but only for five minutes; Mirko Ivanic puts the home side back in front.

Another derby victory for the Champions League participants is seconds away, until VAR spots a foul inside the area, allowing Nemanja Nikolic to convert a 95th-minute penalty to send the Partizan fans into raptures and secure a 3-3 draw in a derby for the ages.

The week has been one for Partizan to savour, but has also encapsulated the current balance of power across the city – OFK's time at the top was brief, but at least they are among the elite once more; Partizan recovered from earlier setbacks to prove they're still the main challengers to the heavyweights; yet, those dominant heavyweights are still unbeatable – the draw maintained Red Star's 21-point lead at the top, as they stroll towards an eighth consecutive league title.

Plotting ways to knock Red Star off their perch look futile, as the gap widens on and off the pitch. But as long as plans for financial stability at Partizan and a return home to Karaburma for OFK are achievable long-term goals, hope remains. The Red Star will surely shine brightest for the next few years, but there is plenty of fight left in the Partizans, while one cannot discount a new age of Romanticism.

Dramatic derby...Partizan players celebrate with their fans after scoring in the 3-3 draw with Red Star

25 Season-defining stars

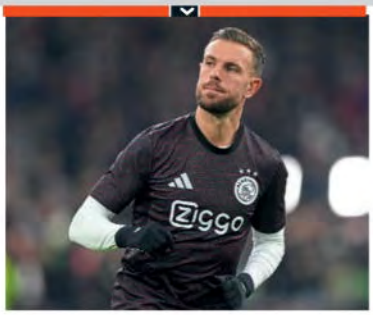
From in-form stars and rising wonderkids to new recruits and revitalised veterans, **Jamie Evans** highlights the players that could settle the burning questions as the European club season inches towards crunch time…

1 RAPHINHA *(Barcelona)*

Only two players scored more goals than Raphinha's eight in the league phase of the Champions League, which, combined with an impressive La Liga haul, means he already has over 20 goals in all competitions for the first time in his career. Particularly explosive since the turn of the year, scoring a brace in Barca's Spanish Super Cup victory over Real Madrid and another in the 5-4 thriller against Benfica, the Brazilian was reportedly close to leaving last year after a rumoured €90m bid from Saudi Arabia. Now, he is proving decisive in Barca's hunt for trophies. Lining up on the left of the attack, next to veteran striker Robert Lewandowski and opposite wonderkid winger Lamine Yamal, he is their only attacker currently in his peak years.

2 NICO GONZALEZ *(Manchester City)*

In Manchester City's ideal world, Nico would probably have been a summer arrival, one to be gradually integrated into the midfield alongside Rodri while adapting to the heavy demands of the Premier League. Instead, he has been thrust straight into the action, tasked not only with replacing the 2024 Ballon d'Or winner in the first XI but also with helping to turn around a dire season, all amid unhelpful comparisons to both his new team-mate, and his new manager Pep Guardiola, who, like Nico, is a fellow *La Masia* graduate. It is a tall order for the former Porto man; City's hopes for the season might well rest on him rising to the occasion.



3 JORDAN HENDERSON *(Ajax)*

Henderson's plan of quietly rebuilding his reputation as captain of Ajax following his ill-fated move to Saudi Arabia was going so well up until January, when the former England midfielder was closely linked with a move to Monaco and then got into an argument with a journalist over the story during a bad-tempered press conference. Prior to that, Henderson had been at the heart of the Amsterdammers' recovery from last season's disastrous fifth-place finish, and will need to put that January distraction behind him as the team locks into battle with PSV for the Eredivisie title.

4 CHARALAMPOS KOSTOULAS *(Olympiacos)*

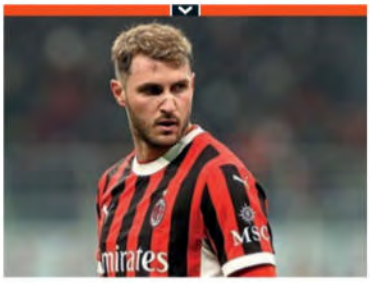
Last season, Olympiacos' U19s won the UEFA Youth League, and one of the stars of that triumph has already made a big impression on the first team. Kostoulas is the kind of tearaway talent that sets the pulse racing: physically imposing despite being just 17, he roams the final third trying to make things happen. In January he made his biggest statement yet, coming off the bench at half-time with the team 1-0 down to Aris and scoring twice to seal the win. For the second year in a row, the Greek title race looks like going down to the wire, and the teen is set for a key role.

5 OSCAR GLOUKH *(Red Bull Salzburg)*

Missing out on last season's title by two points was one thing for Red Bull Salzburg, but falling ten points behind the leaders and holders Sturm Graz by mid-February this season is unforgivable. Not that the ultra-talented Gloukh can be blamed: the Israeli playmaker already has double figures for goals and assists combined – now, he needs some help from his team-mates. It's a big season for the 20-year-old, his third in Austria, that will culminate in this summer's Club World Cup. Premier League scouts are paying close attention to his progress.

6 LEON GRGIC *(Sturm Graz)*

So far this season the 19-year-old's energies have been reserved for the UEFA Youth League, where he scored five goals in as many games in the group stage, but that could be about to change. In January Sturm Graz cashed in on Mika Biereth, who played a key role in last season's domestic double triumph, and with his departure to Monaco there is a goals deficit to make up. Grgic, an Austria U21 international, scored three league goals before he'd even started a game this season, and could add to that tally if he is promoted from his role as supersub.



7 SANTIAGO GIMENEZ *(Milan)*

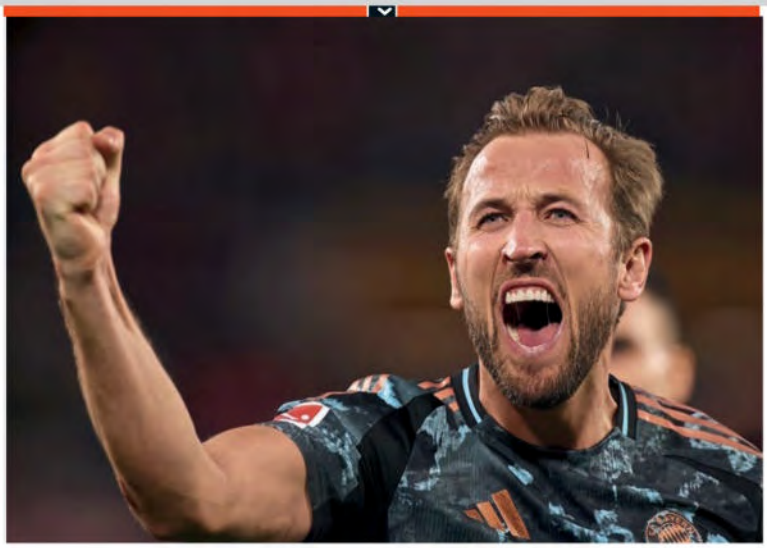
At the start of the season, the question hanging over Milan was whether their new-look attack led by Alvaro Morata could take them to the title after finishing second to arch-rivals Inter in 2024. Seven months on, with the Spain captain loaned to Galatasaray and the coach that signed him, Paulo Fonseca, sacked, the answer is an emphatic no. In January, the *Rossoneri* signed Gimenez for €32m to help revive their ailing season. A prolific scorer in two and a half years with Feyenoord, netting 45 goals in 73 Eredivisie games, the Argentina-born Mexico striker has long been destined for one of Europe's top five leagues, and two goals in his first two Serie A games suggests the San Siro could be a good fit.

8 GIORGI MAMARDASHVILI *(Valencia)*

Liverpool fans curious about their summer signing might be alarmed to see his team floundering towards the bottom of La Liga and still smarting from January's 7-1 defeat to Barca. Yet that loss, devastating and headline-grabbing as it was, was Valencia's only defeat in six league games, a run that saw the 24-year-old goalkeeper keep two clean sheets, giving hope to *Los Che* in their relegation battle. The club has been devastated by years of off-field mismanagement, meaning they could not turn down Liverpool's €35m offer for one of their most prized assets. Ensuring he stayed for the rest of this season, though, could ensure their La Liga survival.

9 BRUMA *(Benfica)*

Bruma was already unpopular among Sporting fans after an extremely messy departure from the club back in 2013, and 12 years on he's compounded that reputation by joining their biggest rivals. The extravagantly talented 30-year-old winger has had a turbulent career since that disputed move to Galatasaray, but seemed to have settled after joining Braga in 2023. His form in the first half of this campaign – 12 goals in all competitions, already his best-ever tally – earned a move to Benfica and, if he were to help the Eagles reel in Sporting at the top of the league, he could go down as one of the most memorable characters in the story of the Lisbon clubs' rivalry.



10 HARRY KANE *(Bayern Munich)*

After Bayern Munich drew 0-0 with their nearest challengers Bayer Leverkusen in mid-February, the Bavarian giants had an eight-point lead at the top of the Bundesliga table – thanks, in no small part, to the prolific form of Kane. While the Englishman is locked in a battle with the likes of Mohamed Salah, Mateo Retegui, Robert Lewandowski and Erling Haaland for the European Golden Shoe award – which he won last season – team honours are what Kane craves most. Still, he can never stray too far from the goalscoring spotlight: as well as the Golden Shoe, he is also pursuing Lewandowski's single season scoring record of 41, a tally he fell five short of last term.

11 FRANJO IVANOVIC *(Union Saint-Gilloise)*

In each of the last three seasons, Union Saint-Gilloise have gone into April – when the Belgian league is split into championship contenders and relegation battlers – either top or joint-top of the table, before failing to secure the crown. This season, whether by accident or design, they have started slower, and are aiming to peak at just the right time. And with Ivanovic, a summer signing from Rijeka, they may be well placed to do just that. The Croatia U21 striker hit eight goals in seven league games between mid-December and early February, a run in which USG remained unbeaten. Can he, and they, maintain that form to land a long-awaited title for this historic club?

12 GODUINE KOYALIPOU *(Lens)*

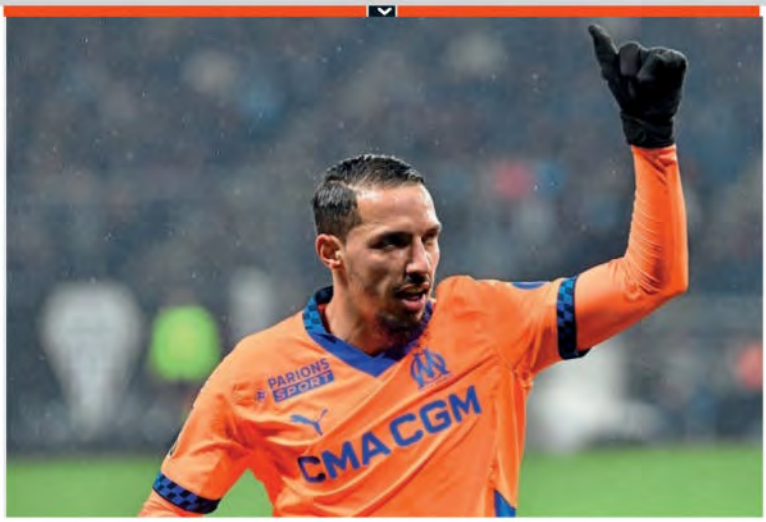
In January, Lens took an intriguing roll of the dice in their pursuit of a top-four finish in Ligue 1, paying CSKA Sofia a little over €2m to sign Koyalipou. The forward only spent six months in Bulgaria, scoring 14 goals in just 16 league games, after notching 16 goals last season for Beveren in the Belgian second tier. Lens are already the sixth club of the 25-year-old's career, and his third in France. A goal on his league debut suggests he might finally be ready to settle.

13 HUGO EKITIKE *(Eintracht Frankfurt)*

Ekitike helped ensure that his former team-mate Omar Marmoush departed Frankfurt in style, with the duo both on target in January's 4-1 win over Freiburg, and the Frenchman took that form forward with five goals in his next six games. Eintracht didn't hold back in trying to replace the goals lost by Marmoush's departure, paying Marseille around €26m for Elye Wahi and bringing Michy Batshuayi back to Germany from Galatasaray. But it is 22-year-old Ekitike, signed permanently from PSG in the summer after a promising loan spell, who will lead the way in their bid for a first top-four finish since 2012.

14 MYLES LEWIS-SKELLY *(Arsenal)*

Alongside fellow academy graduate Ethan Nwaneri – who seems to have the world at his feet – the 18-year-old starlet's rapid elevation into the Gunners XI offers immediate benefits for Mikel Arteta. Tenacious defensively, unusually strong for one so young and excellent in possession when taking the ball on the half-turn – not to mention his capability of telling final-third contributions, such as his composed finish v Manchester City – the left-back/midfielder's youthful injection of energy and fearlessness has provided a boost to a team that has come so close to the title in the last two seasons.

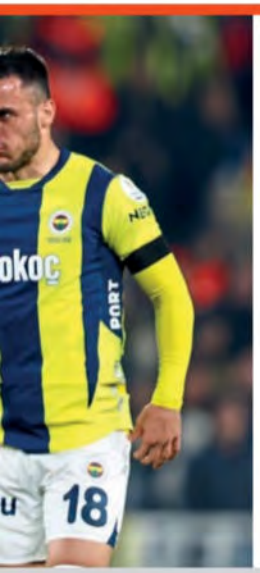


15 ISMAEL BENNACER *(Marseille)*

According to a 2019 census, Marseille's largest immigrant group by far is that of Algeria, and the club bolstered its links to that community with the January captures of Algerian internationals Amine Gouiri and Bennacer. For the latter, born an hour along the coast, it is a homecoming move and, upon his arrival, said: "I always wanted to play for OM." The Player of the Tournament when Algeria won the 2019 AFCON, and a regular in Milan's 2021-22 *Scudetto* win, he is a player with both pedigree and, still only 27, potential. Will this move be a match made in heaven?

16 MOHAMED IHATTAREN *(RKC Waalwijk)*

RKC looked dead and buried before Christmas, but a change in formation brought them shoots of improvement, an unbeaten run and an emphatic 5-0 win over NAC Breda. Ihattaren operates behind two strikers in a new 4-3-1-2 and may now finally be about to deliver on his undoubted potential. The 23-year-old counts PSV, Juventus, Sampdoria and Ajax among his former clubs, but was in danger of fading into obscurity after being released by Slavia Prague last year. Based on his form at the start of 2025, this may be the start of his – and RKC's – revival.

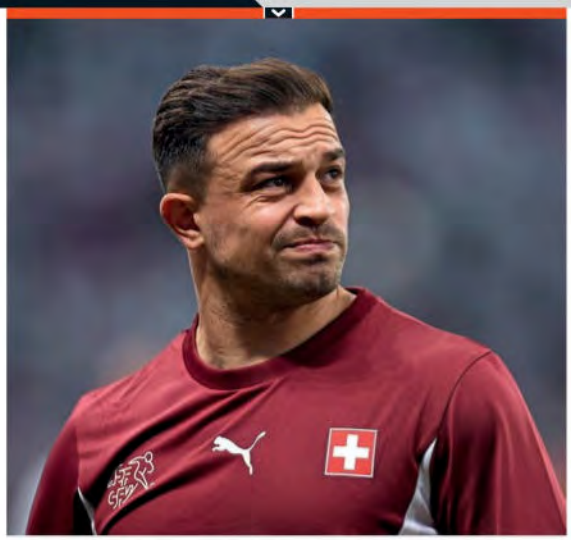


17 MILAN SKRINIAR *(Fenerbahce)*

Jose Mourinho only arrived in Istanbul last summer yet has already signed three centre-backs of Champions League pedigree. Skriniar was the third, following Diego Carlos and Caglar Soyuncu, with the Portuguese coach finally landing the Slovakian after pursuing him as both Manchester United and Tottenham boss. The fact he is now playing in Turkey, on loan from PSG where he was edged out by Willian Pacho, might be considered a step down. But as an aggressive, natural defender, he is the sort of player that Mourinho adores, and will be key in Fener's bid to rein in Turkish league leaders Galatasaray.

18 ADEMOLA LOOKMAN *(Atalanta)*

On paper, Lookman is one of Atalanta's most prized assets. The hat-trick hero of last season's Europa League final, he has continued to plunder goals and assists in *La Dea's* pursuit of an unprecedented Serie A title. Yet all is not well between the Nigerian and his manager, Gian Piero Gasperini, after the pair publicly fell out over Lookman's penalty miss against Club Brugge in the Champions League. With plenty of reported Premier League interest, the coming months are likely to be Lookman's Bergamo swansong. Will he go out in style?



19 XHERDAN SHAQIRI *(Basel)*

For 20-time Swiss champions Basel, last season's eighth-place finish was a low ebb that required something special to lift them again. Enter Shaqiri, arguably their finest-ever academy graduate, who returned home from Chicago Fire last summer, 12 years after first leaving the club for Bayern Munich. In February, he scored two penalties – his 18th and 19th league goal contributions of the season – to secure a 2-1 win over Luzern and take Basel to the top of the table. If they are still there come May, Shaqiri will be even more revered in Basel than he already is.

20 VIKTOR GYOKERES *(Sporting)*

With 22 goals by mid-February, only Liverpool's Mohamed Salah had scored more in Europe's top eight leagues than Gyokeres. The rules of the European Golden Shoe mean that the Swede will have to work harder than those in the top five leagues to win the award – their goals count for two points, his only count for 1.5 – but if he continues to net at the same rate he will offer stiff competition to Salah, Harry Kane, Erling Haaland and Robert Lewandowski. More importantly, he will give Sporting a significant chance of defending their Primeira Liga title for the first time since the 1950s.

21 LUCAS VAZQUEZ *(Real Madrid)*

The 33-year-old is a long, long way from being Madrid's most celebrated player, but he could be among their most important in the closing months of the season. With Dani Carvajal out for the rest of the season with a serious knee injury and Liverpool not entertaining the notion of selling Trent Alexander-Arnold in January, Vazquez is now *Los Blancos'* only fit right-back. Carlo Ancelotti has experimented with other options there, including using Federico Valverde out of position, but the Uruguayan is far more valuable in midfield. Vazquez's form and fitness therefore must stay intact if Madrid are to achieve their goals.

22 TANGUY NDOMBELE *(Nice)*

These days, Nice is serving as a home for a number of ex-prodigies, with Mohamed-Ali Cho, Sofiane Diop and Youssoufa Moukoko all plying their trade on the Cote d'Azur. Yet it is Ndombele who is enjoying the most impressive revitalisation, displaying the consistency that eluded him at Tottenham and in subsequent loans at Lyon, Napoli and Galatasaray. At least he was, before injuries began to restrict his game time. The challenge for the 28-year-old, then, is to prove that this latest setback is no more than a stumble and that he will soon be back anchoring Nice's midfield in their pursuit of Champions League qualification.

23 SCOTT McTOMINAY *(Napoli)*

Napoli opted not to reinvest the €70m they received from Paris Saint-Germain for Khvicha Kvaratskhelia on a replacement, with a loan deal for Milan's Noah Okafor the full extent of their replacement plans. Evidently, manager Antonio Conte believes that his team has enough firepower to win their second *Scudetto* in three years, and McTominay is central to those plans. Despite leading for much of the season, Napoli are significantly less prolific than their title rivals, so McTominay contributing goals from midfield – the 28-year-old Scotland international scored three in six league fixtures after Kvaratskhelia's final game for the club – is particularly valuable.

24 IVAN RAKITIC *(Hajduk Split)*

It would be particularly cruel on Hajduk Split if, after 20 years of finishing behind Dinamo Zagreb, they were to finally climb above their eternal rivals in the league standings only to see another team crowned champions of Croatia. Yet that is the situation that could unfold this season, with Rijeka battling with them for top spot while Dinamo lurk behind in third. Last season, Hajduk's challenge fell apart in the second half of the campaign, but with the vastly experienced Rakitic, a four-time Spanish league title winner with Barcelona who joined the club last summer after a brief spell in Saudi Arabia with Al Shabab, anchoring the midfield they are hoping to avoid a repeat.

25 CHRIS WOOD *(Nottingham Forest)*

Forest are right in the race for Champions League qualification despite being one of the Premier League's lowest-ranked sides for possession. That, of course, is part of Nuno Espirito Santo's gameplan, but it does rely on them being clinical when they do get chances, and in Wood they have a striker in the form of his life, impressively outscoring his xG. This is already the most prolific Premier League season of the Kiwi's career, but he can't afford to let up if Forest are to achieve their dream of a top-four finish.

6 of the best

South American wonderkids

Tim Vickery picks out the stars of the recent South American Under-20 Championship

1 FELIPE LONGO

BRAZIL

After going down 6-0 to rivals Argentina in their opening game, the secret of Brazil's recuperation did not have much to do with stylish football. Instead, it was based on raw physical power – and a massive comparative advantage in goalkeeping.

This is a position where it is usual to mature late. Often, Brazil benefited from poor goalkeeping at the other end. And once Felipe Longo – who is yet to play a competitive game for his club Corinthians – came into the XI for the decisive second stage, time and again Brazil benefited from his excellence and capacity to stand up big in one-v-one situations.

Only beaten twice (once from the penalty spot) in five games, Felipe Longo was the standout player in the side that ended up winning the tournament.

2 Claudio ECHEVERRI

ARGENTINA

Exactly 20 years after Messi came out into the sunshine in the South American Under-20s, another little Argentine attacking midfielder was the star of the show. The punishing schedule took its toll in the end, but there was no doubt that *"El Diablito"* was the competition's best player.

He was both bow and arrow: the brains of the attack, full of ideas, and the executioner, who had to take on extra goalscoring duties after striker Agustin Ruberto suffered a serious injury. Combines mazy dribbling with the vision to see the early pass, and has the capacity to combine at pace.

Now leaves River Plate to join Manchester City, who may well be reluctant to release him for the U20 World Cup in September. The bigger question is whether, like Messi 20 years ago, he can force his way into the senior squad in time for 2026.

3 Neiser VILLARREAL
COLOMBIA

The find of the tournament was the cutting edge of a team which in patches looked like the most impressive in the field, but went down to narrow defeats against Brazil and Argentina. Villarreal was always a threat, quick, strong and sleek while also versatile, able to drop back and combine as well as running in behind the opposition defence. The efficient finisher was the finals' top scorer with eight goals, but also laid on chances for others. One pass, which took out the entire Chile defence, was a work of art.

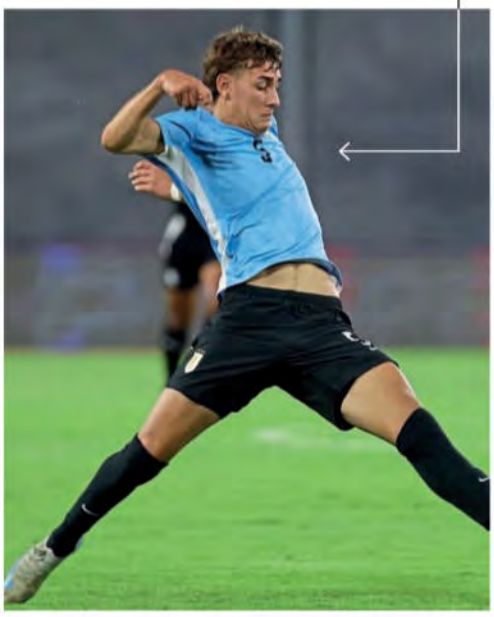
Still with Millonarios, Villarreal is now in the shop window and, with the hunger of Colombian clubs to often cash in on their players, will presumably soon be on the move. He might even be in the running for a promotion to the senior squad, too.

4 Octavio ALFONSO
PARAGUAY

The real star for Paraguay was coach Antolin Alcaraz, who took over in the course of the finals after Aldo Duscher was sacked for overseeing a 6-0 thrashing by Uruguay. Alcaraz switched to a back four, got the team into the second round and shrugged off a 4-0 drubbing by Colombia to win three of the last four games and qualify for the U20 World Cup just behind the Colombians.

It was a typically Paraguayan collective effort on the field, but it was positive to see that an effort was being made to nourish talent, such as this left-footed playmaker, a little languid but a wonderful striker of the ball. The Guarani starlet scored two vital goals, and set up others with quality set-pieces. The big question now – is he sufficiently dynamic to make an impact in the senior game?

5 Juan RODRIGUEZ
URUGUAY



One of the major surprises was the reigning Under-20 world champions failing to qualify for the next edition – even after topping their group, beating Paraguay 6-0 on the way. But in a second phase full of narrow defeats, it was a 1-0 loss to the same Paraguay that sealed their fate.

A consolation was that Rodriguez was a strong candidate for centre-back of the competition. There was an air of precision about everything he did, neat and unhurried. And a consolation for the sound tackler is that in 2005 Diego Godin was also part of a Uruguay side that failed to qualify for the U20 World Cup.

Last year, Penarol loaned him out to Boston River, where he played a full part in the team making it into the qualifying rounds of this year's Libertadores. It will be fascinating to see what Penarol do with him next.

6 Moises PANIAGUA
BOLIVIA

Bolivia narrowly lost all their games but at least there was confirmation that the hype around this 17-year-old winger might be justified. Paniagua was just 15 when he scored his first goal for Always Ready in the Bolivian league. The senior national team wanted to take him for experience to last year's Copa America, but he was too young to get a US visa without authorisation from both his parents, which did not come in time. In this competition, he showed that he can walk on his own, with delightful balance and trickery. Is young enough to play in the next edition of this competition in 2027.

PLAY LIKE IT'S THE '90s

Romania are trying to recreate their golden era by reaching their first World Cup since 1998

Words: Samindra Kunti

In 1998, Romania crashed out of the World Cup in the last 16 after a 1-0 defeat to Croatia. The entire XI had dyed their hair blond during the group stage, but under the blazing sun in Bordeaux, that gimmick would not prove enough against the tournament sensations, who claimed bronze. With an exhausted Gheorghe Hagi a long way from his best, substituted in the 56th minute, Romania offered little in response to Davor Suker's penalty. They have not played a World Cup game since.

It was a sad farewell to skipper Hagi, Gheorghe Popescu and Dan Petrescu, who had formed the backbone of Romania's golden generation that reached three World Cups in a row. At Italia '90, returning to the world stage for the first time since 1970, Romania reached the last 16 before falling to the Republic of Ireland on penalties. At USA '94, Hagi and Co. delighted with barnstorming football, culminating in a 3-2 victory against Argentina in the last 16. Manager

Bleached blond... Romania's players at France '98, the country's last World Cup

Anghel Iordanescu didn't hold back in his assessment of the achievement: "This is the greatest event celebrated by our people since the Revolution. It's also the greatest moment in our football history."

Four years later, on the eve of the tournament in France, Hagi, a product of state-run academies, warned that Romanian football was on the verge of collapse. In his view, the success of the national team papered over the cracks of a domestic ecosystem that was falling apart. The team's talisman lamented the decline of Romanian clubs and predicted that the national game would hit rock bottom in a couple of years.

The midfielder's words would prove to be prescient. Romania almost qualified for the 2002 World Cup in the Far East but fell to Slovenia in the play-offs. Two decades on, the Eastern European nation is still waiting for the opportunity to shine on the world stage. Next summer, the United States will welcome the World Cup again (alongside co-hosts Mexico and Canada) in an expanded 48-team format, offering the opportunity to more teams than ever to participate. Romania harbour hopes of returning to America and rekindling those memories of Ilie Dumitrescu's famous goals against Argentina in Pasadena.

Perhaps the 1990s generation was an outlier, but Romania's decline has a myriad of explanations: financial mismanagement, corruption and a lack of vision. Clubs fell into disrepair with memories of Steaua Bucharest's European Cup triumph in 1986 fading fast. Rapid Bucharest were relegated and all of Dinamo Bucharest, Otelul Galati and Universitatea Cluj became insolvent. With neglected infrastructure and a football culture that descended into unprofessionalism, Romanian football spiralled.

The impact of the country's revolution of 1989, which saw the old regime overthrown, cannot be ignored.

New era... Romania reached the knockout stages of Euro 2024

Talismanic...Gheorghe Hagi was Romania's star man in the 1990s

"After the fall of Communism, it was like the wild, wild West in the '90s," explains Florin Gardos, a former defender for Romania and Southampton. "Romania was a young democracy. Football and sport in general weren't as important. Our overall system and our youth development were left behind, while most countries in Europe started investing more and more."

Romania's technical director Mihai Stoichita echoes Gardos' view. Following a managerial career that took him from Panama to Kuwait, Stoichita has been working at the Romanian Football Federation (FRF) since 2017. He says: "It was a time of transition. Perhaps Romanians were more interested in developing a better life for themselves. They forgot about what in my view are fundamental aspects of society: art, theatre and football. You cannot separate society and economics from football."

The current administration at the federation is on a mission to modernise, focusing on the development of youth football as well as the women's game. It's all aimed at putting Romania back on the football map.

With a view to being inclusive and tapping into the talent pool, they also seek to have a strong presence in rural areas. The federation runs management courses to help educate tomorrow's club officials. They have looked to the West for inspiration, forming youth development partnerships with Belgium and Switzerland. Romania has increased the number of youth competitions and introduced the concept of late-mature teams.

"Football is like learning to write," says

Poster boy...Tottenham defender Radu Dragusin

Stoichita. "You have to practise a lot to write in a beautiful way. It takes time to find a beautiful way of writing.

"We are working to arrive at the same level as Croatia and that's important. We want to be closer and closer to the level of Croatian football."

Croatia disappointed at last summer's European Championship, but the rest of Eastern Europe enjoyed something of a resurgence with 11 representatives in the tournament. Every team from the former Soviet bloc has its own story but, with the right funding and approach, they demonstrated that they could rise again. Georgia were the breakout team, falling in the second round.

Romania were less expansive but, watching from the stands in Germany, Gardos could see their potential: "Some players were playing in Serie B and got promoted. Their confidence and value went up a little bit. Everything went up a little bit."

> "This is the greatest event celebrated by our people since the Revolution. It's also the greatest moment in our football history"
>
> **Then-Romania coach Anghel Iordanescu after beating Argentina at USA '94**

The poster boy for Romania's rise was Radu Dragusin, who moved to Tottenham for €25 million in January 2024. A front-foot defender with good acceleration and a high work-rate, the centre-back became his country's most high-profile player with his Premier League move.

At Euro 2024, Dragusin and Romania were no match for the Netherlands in the last 16, but the team of then-manager Edward Iordanescu (the son of Anghel) exhibited enough of a modern mindset. They displayed an ability to play out from the back, transitioned quickly, pressed aggressively at times and demonstrated good mobility on the ball. Perhaps most importantly for the future of the team, the squad featured eight players from the side that reached the last four of the Under-21 European Championship in 2019. To date, 20 players from that side have gone on to feature for the senior team.

"It was a very important moment," Stoichita says. "That semi-final was a first in our history. At half-time, we led Germany 2-1. Romania played some spectacular football. The fans came from everywhere to support the team. Think about that, it was not the senior team."

It was undoubtedly a landmark achievement. Romania topped a group that included England, France and Croatia, and were minutes from taking Germany to extra-time in the semi-finals before two stoppage-time goals sent them home.

Still, there is a sense that the leading lights of that squad fell short of their potential. George Puscas, the second top scorer at the finals and named in

Next generation... Romania's Under-21s reached the semi-final of the U21 European Championship in 2019

the team of the tournament, left Internazionale for Reading – then in the EFL Championship – shortly after the finals, but never truly settled in England and is now playing in Turkey for Bodrum. He at least was selected for Euro 2024: goalkeeper Ionut Radu, another highly-rated graduate of Inter's academy, has just four caps to his name after failing to nail down a first-team spot either at the San Siro or in a succession of loan spells – including at Bournemouth – and recently joined Venezia for the rest of the season. Tudor Baluta – who also moved to England in 2019, joining Brighton – had his progress stalled by a succession of injuries and now plays in Poland for Slask Wroclaw.

Even the success stories, the ones who formed the attack at Euro 2024, like wingers Dennis Man (Parma) and Florinel Coman (Cagliari) or playmaker Ianis Hagi (Rangers), aren't playing at the very pinnacle of the European game as it seemed they would at the time. There is still time for that to change – all the players of that generation are still in their mid-20s – but there is no truly elite talent, no Luka Modric, no Khvicha Kvaratskhelia, to help elevate Romania to another level in the way that Croatia or Georgia have been.

> "It was a very important moment. That semi-final was a first in our history. At half-time, we led Germany 2-1. Romania played some spectacular football"
>
> **Romania's technical director Mihai Stoichita on the Romanians' Under-21 side at Euro 2019**

Hagi Junior...Ianis at last summer's Euros

Nevertheless, after years of youth development being neglected in Romania, 2019 was an important step forward. The Romanians will return to the continental Under-21 finals in Slovakia this summer – perhaps this generation can take them even further.

The returning Mircea Lucescu, who succeeded Edward Iordanescu as senior national team head coach last August – 38 years after his last spell in charge – has everything at his disposal to build for the future. The recent Nations League games demonstrated that the veteran coach, who wants his team to dominate the ball, has work to do. Against Kosovo, their only group opponent that played

Under-21 starlets... Romania beat England 4-2 at the 2019 finals

possession-based football, Romania struggled. UEFA awarded Romania the return tie 3-0 after Kosovo walked off in the last minute of the match in protest at alleged discriminatory chanting.

Lucescu has also been handed a clear path to North America. Drawn in Group H of World Cup qualifying with Austria, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Cyprus and San Marino, Romania can expect to compete for top spot. Second place will secure a play-off spot, and even if they fall short of that, topping their 2024-25 Nations League group could provide a backdoor route to the finals too. It's time then to walk the talk and relive those dreamy afternoons of barnstorming football under the American sun.

USA '94

Together with their fellow Eastern Europeans Bulgaria – who went all the way to the semi-finals – Romania were a smash hit, capturing the hearts and minds of American and international fans. A tight-knit team, manager Anghel Iordanescu started just 13 different players during the tournament, but his cast of stars, built around the metronomic Gheorghe Hagi, delivered sumptuous football and a result that still stands as the apex in Romanian football history.

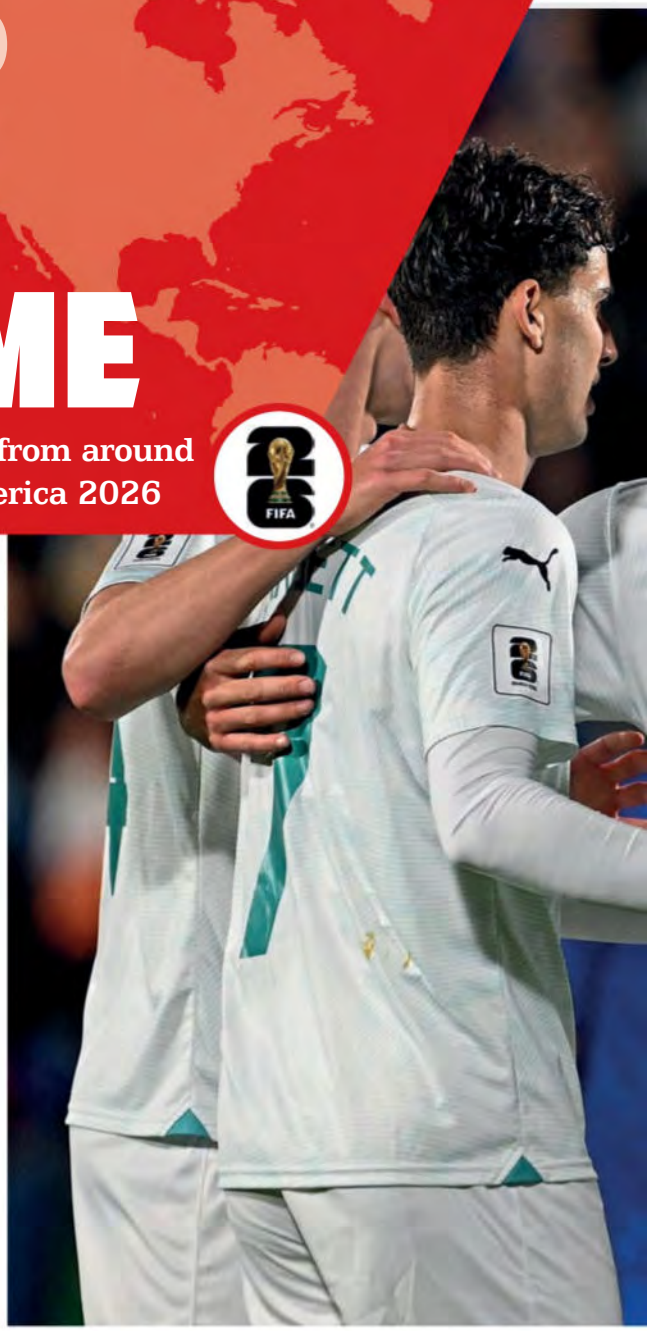
They fluffed their lines against Switzerland in a 4-1 defeat, but victories against Colombia and then Argentina in the round of 16 ranked among the most entertaining matches of the competition. Against Sweden, Romania's weakness – their inability to protect leads – cost them a spot in a showpiece semi-final against eventual winners Brazil.

Hagi, Romania's talisman and greatest-ever player, set the tempo with suave skills, vision and lethal set-pieces, plus three goals and four assists. But this was no one-man team: his brother-in-law Gheorghe Popescu, who could play as a sweeper or as a holding midfielder – as he later showed in spells at Tottenham and Barcelona – displayed immense tactical acumen. Electric forward Ilie Dumitrescu (who also joined Spurs after the finals) scored twice against Argentina, striker Florin Raducioiu (later at West Ham United) bagged braces against both Colombia and Sweden, while wing-back Dan Petrescu provided effervescent energy on the right wing. The latter earned a move to Sheffield Wednesday and then Chelsea after the tournament, despite failing to score in the quarter-final penalty shootout defeat to Sweden.

WORLD CUP QUALIFYING CRUNCH TIME

The upcoming international break will see teams from around the world take a decisive step towards North America 2026

Sorely missed ...Fiji skipper Roy Krishna will miss the qualifiers



OCEANIA

New Zealand remain overwhelming favourites to qualify automatically ahead of Fiji, Tahiti and New Caledonia in March's final round

The third round of the 2026 World Cup qualifiers in Oceania will represent a final chance for a place on the game's biggest stage for a handful of the region's veteran stars.

Four teams have made the third round, and New Zealand face Fiji in the semi-final on March 21 with home advantage. Darren Bazeley's side already have the benefit of playing in Wellington and have been aided further by a debilitating injury to Fiji's key player.

Roy Krishna, 37, Fiji's all-time top scorer and record appearance maker, injured his anterior cruciate ligament in November playing for his club side Odisha in the Indian Super League.

The absence of Fiji's talisman is a major blow, and another is an attempt to recruit players from the Fijian diaspora that has been undertaken with help from consultants, the International Football Consultancy.

A swathe of players, from Brisbane City striker Malakai Love-Semira and Auckland FC's Dan Hall to players in England's lower leagues, could have made for an interesting game with the All Whites. But local red tape has scuppered those plans, as Fiji coach Rob Sherman explains: "All passported players are available but Fiji's passport laws have prevented us accessing numerous lads in pro football. So, all our team will be semi-pro or amateur. We'll do our best."

Fiji are unbeaten in the qualifiers but New Zealand makes for a daunting challenge

Fiji are unbeaten in the qualifiers but a New Zealand squad whose stars range from Chris Wood – 33, but top scorer in the qualifiers so far with six goals and scoring regularly for Nottingham Forest in the Premier League – to Empoli defender Liberato Cacace and a swathe of A-League players makes for a daunting challenge.

New Caledonia take on Tahiti in the other semi-final, which guarantees that a French overseas territory will appear in the final.

Like Krishna, the qualifiers represent probably the last chance to play in a

Overwhelming favourites... New Zealand

World Cup finals for cousins Alvin and Teaonui Tehau, now 35 and 32 respectively and part of Tahiti's golden generation of players who lifted the OFC Nations Cup in 2012 and played in FIFA's Confederations Cup the following year.

Another younger member of the Tehau clan, 25-year-old striker Roonui, also featured in the qualifiers for Tahiti, whose squad mostly play at home although promising young right-back/right-winger Mateo Degrumelle is in France with Quevilly Rouen Metropole B. "I have all my players and have prepared my team to win and go to Eden Park," says Tahiti head coach Samuel Garcia.

New Caledonia boss Johann Sidaner has a handful of players in the French lower leagues, such as forward Georges Gope-Fenepej at Saint-Pryve Saint Hilaire in the fourth tier and midfielder Joseph Athale at Olympique Saint-Quentin in the league below.

Last World Cup chance...Tahiti's Teaonui Tehau back at the 2013 Confederations Cup

This is likely to be a final chance for World Cup glory for Cesar Zeoula, New Caledonia's record appearance-maker, who plays for US Chauvigny in France's Championnat National 3 and is now 35. As *Les Cagous* topped their group unbeaten in the second round and won gold at the last Pacific Games football tournament in 2023, Sidaner's team will be marginal favourites.

After the semi-finals, the qualifiers then move to Eden Park in Auckland for the final on March 24, where Wood is most likely to be the one celebrating but the losers will have the consolation of a second attempt via a place in the inter-confederation play-offs.

Steve Menary

THE RACE TO JOIN ARGENTINA

The World Cup holders have almost secured their spot in North America, but who will join them?

South America's World Cup qualification moves into its final third at the end of March and, with six teams qualifying (plus a seventh going into a play-off), this is the moment when the first places in next year's tournament will be filled.

Leaders Argentina, for example, already have 25 points. In all of the previous campaigns, the side finishing sixth had between 23 and 27. It could be, then, that the defending world champions already have enough points in the bag. They might need one more win to make absolutely sure – but it probably will not come easily in March, as Lionel Scaloni's side travel to Uruguay before hosting Brazil. These are tough fixtures, and they could shed some light on a question that has been worrying some in Argentina: with two Copa America wins either side of that triumph in Qatar, this has been a wonderful cycle for the side, but have they now passed their peak? Angel Di Maria, who retired after last year's Copa, will be extremely difficult to replace. It looks increasingly probable that Lionel Messi will stick around for one last World Cup, but he will turn 39 during the competition – can he still tip the balance? It is worth remembering that Argentina will be attempting something that has never been done before: retaining the title in a different continent.

Second-placed Uruguay also have a tricky few days ahead. After meeting Argentina, they travel to the dreaded altitude of Bolivia. There is a question hanging over them, too: have they put last year's wobble behind them? And have relations been patched up between coach Marcelo Bielsa and his players?

Ecuador, in third, are at home to Venezuela and away to Chile, and they will be looking to continue the momentum of last November, when they thrashed Bolivia at home and then produced a candidate for the performance of the campaign so far, opening up with a splendidly fluent few minutes away to Colombia, and then holding on for an hour when they were down to ten men. Their defensive unit is looking chillingly efficient, with just one goal conceded in the last nine rounds. But head coach Sebastian Beccacece would love a goalscorer to emerge to help ease the pressure on the veteran Enner Valencia.

It looks increasingly probable that Lionel Messi will stick around for one last World Cup, but he will turn 39 during the competition – can he still tip the balance?

There is an obvious question haunting fourth-placed Colombia, who after their trip to Brazil are at home to Paraguay. Under coach Nestor Lorenzo they put together a long unbeaten run, which ended in the final of last year's Copa America. For a while they were the only team in the field not to have suffered a defeat. But they lost both matches in November, and were beaten in three of the last four games. Lorenzo will be happy that James Rodriguez is finally seeing some club action, this time in Mexico at Leon, as he attempts to steady the ship.

Under pressure...Brazil coach Dorival Junior

This has been an extremely frustrating campaign for fifth-placed Brazil, and these two tough fixtures – at home to Colombia and away to Argentina – might be decisive for coach Dorival Junior. An obvious question here is whether Neymar will be part of the side. Now 33 and back at Santos, it seems likely that he would be expected to set up play from deep for the likes of Vinicius Junior. Either way, Neymar's quest to have one last crack at the World Cup promises to be an intriguing storyline over the next few months.

Still going...Leo Messi looks likely to play in one more World Cup

Paraguay in sixth were the team who did best in last year's matches, climbing up the table impressively under Gustavo Alfaro. A year ago, they appeared to be out of the race for 2026 – now they are likely qualifiers. A win in their next game, at home to Chile, would be a vital step towards a first World Cup since 2010.

Behind them there is the battle for the play-off slot. Bolivia are in pole position, especially now that they are using the extreme altitude of El Alto. But Paraguay fought back to get a 2-2 draw there in November, so nothing can be taken for granted. Venezuela had a poor 2024, and after eight games without a win the dream of making their World Cup debut is seriously threatened. The trip to Ecuador looks daunting, and the home game against Peru after that is one that they simply must win.

Chile's 4-2 victory over Venezuela restored some hope that they might be able to sneak in. But they have some ground to make up, and they now meet the form sides – Paraguay away and Ecuador at home. Which leaves Peru, who have just hired Oscar Ibanez as coach. With just one win and three goals in 12 games they really do not deserve to go to the World Cup, and it would take a miracle to get them there.

Tim Vickery

HOW MUCH HOME ADVANTAGE IS TOO MUCH?

El Alto advantage ...the Bolivians are currently unbeaten at their new home

The question of home advantage is a contested point in South America, where vast distances and differing conditions often make life hard for the visitors. So far in this campaign there have been 32 home wins and ten away – and that 3:1 ratio is standard in the continent's World Cup qualifiers.

In the 1994 campaign, Brazil tried to "persuade" Ecuador and Bolivia not to play at altitude – successfully with the former, unsuccessfully with the latter, when they lost the first qualifier in their history.

As a response, when Brazil were back for the 2002 campaign, CONMEBOL tried to place a restriction. Countries were limited to one host city only – if one had to go up to La Paz, everyone did. On account of its size, Brazil was allowed two. It chose Rio and Sao Paulo, the traditional centres – and quickly realised that a mistake had been made. This is where the fans are most impatient. And so Brazil broke the restriction, using the excuse of an electricity crisis in the Rio and Sao Paulo regions to stage the vital last three home matches in smaller cities with more supportive crowds. Since then it has been a free-for-all – and the best example is Bolivia.

In the middle of this campaign they moved their home games from La Paz (3,600 metres above sea level) to a new stadium in neighbouring El Alto, 400 metres higher. The clear aim is to have unacclimatised opponents gasping for oxygen in the rarefied air.

Is this fair? It is hard to see on what grounds it could be stopped. Is it safe? This is an ongoing debate, but most specialists conclude that, for all the discomforts of altitude, it is significantly less dangerous than extreme heat – and Colombia, for example, make a point of staging their home ties in the afternoon in the sweltering port of Barranquilla.

Will it ensure success? Bolivia swept Venezuela away 4-0 in their new home, and beat Colombia 1-0 despite playing the majority of the game with ten men. But Paraguay managed to come from behind – impressively so, given that chasing the game is reckoned to be the hardest thing at altitude – to force a 2-2 draw last November.

But whatever happens on the road, home wins against Uruguay, Chile and Brazil will probably be good enough to secure a play-off spot for Bolivia, and give them a chance of making the World Cup for the first time since 1994.

Tim Vickery

High altitude...the view from outside Bolivia's ground

DEFINING PERIOD AHEAD

March's pivotal group stage qualifiers will bring the finish line into sight for some African nations, while leaving others trailing further back

Africa's World Cup qualifying group stage campaign passes the halfway point this March. After the two rounds of action, there will only be four matchdays left – in September and October.

While most countries are still in with a chance, several upcoming games will likely prove key in the race to fill places at the finals in North America. The nine group winners all advance, with the four best runners-up getting another crack in November's second round. The winners of that will then enter the new cross-continental play-off system, which takes place in March 2026.

Surprise packages Sudan have a massive showdown with Senegal in Group B that could go a long way to determining who finishes on top of the standings, while Algeria can put some daylight between themselves and the chasing pack in Group G if they beat both Botswana away and Mozambique at home in their next two fixtures.

Sudan surprised everyone with the way they secured qualification for this year's Africa Cup of Nations finals, given that their country is in the midst of a civil war and all their top players are in exile. It would be a fairy tale if they were to go on and qualify for the World Cup, although Senegal are fancied to win the group.

Cameroon, who have been to an African-record eight World Cups previously but have not gone beyond the group stage since their 1990 heroics in Italy, are on top in Group D by a point from Libya, who they host in their second game during this international window.

Egypt and Morocco, who were overwhelming favourites for qualification after the draw handed them relatively easy assignments, have a chance to stretch their leads in their respective groups. Egypt have a four-point lead in Group A and have every chance to keep it up, or even increase it, as they take on Ethiopia and Sierra Leone next. The Moroccans could stretch their three-point advantage in Group E away against Niger and then at home to Tanzania.

Niger are among the 18 countries not allowed to host matches at home because they have no facilities that meet the new exacting standards set by the Confederation of African Football (CAF). While past administrators turned a blind eye to poor pitches, no floodlights and Spartan facilities, over the past three years CAF have sought to pressurise countries into making necessary upgrades to stadia. Some governments have reacted quicker than others but most seem unhurried about fixing up their venues and allowing their teams to play in front of home support.

Tunisia, who are another World Cup regular with six previous tournament appearances, were still looking for a new head coach a month before their Group H clashes at Liberia and at home to Malawi before settling on Sami Trabelsi.

The 57-year-old former defender competed at the 1998 World Cup and had a spell as Tunisia coach between 2011 and 2013. Veteran manager Carlos Queiroz, whose last role was in charge of Qatar, had been Tunisia's first choice until protracted negotiations floundered around Christmas time.

Group C rivals...players of Benin and Nigeria compete for the ball

Nigeria will also have a new man in charge as they seek to resuscitate their faltering campaign, but Eric Chelle has a major task at hand and effectively must win their next fixtures in Rwanda and at

Surprise packages Sudan have a massive showdown with Senegal in Group B that could go a long way to determining who finishes on top of the standings

home to Zimbabwe. There was much consternation in Nigeria over the appointment of the former French-based defender, who won a handful of caps for Mali and then coached them at the last AFCON finals before being fired in June after they lost at home to Ghana in Group I.

Nigeria are in a precarious but not unsalvageable situation. They drew their first three Group C fixtures 1-1 and then lost to neighbours Benin in their last game in June. They are four points behind joint leaders Benin, Rwanda and South Africa.

African champions Ivory Coast lead Group F by a single point ahead of Gabon, where Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang is enjoying yet another comeback to the national team. The Ivorians have two modest fixtures against Burundi and Gambia next but Gabon could slip behind if they stumble away against Kenya, another country looking for a new head coach.

The Kenyans approached ex-South Africa striker Benni McCarthy, who was last working on the Manchester United staff under Erik ten Hag, but nothing had come of that as the March fixtures approached.

Mark Gleeson

World Cup race...Gabon striker Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang tussles with Ivory Coast defender Odilon Kossounou

CAN GHANA BOUNCE BACK?

AFCON crisis... Ghana crashed out of the 2023 finals early and failed to qualify for the 2025 edition

Ghana could find redemption from their 2025 Africa Cup of Nations qualifying disaster sooner rather than later as a place at the next World Cup finals beckons.

The Black Stars share top spot in Group I of Africa's 2026 World Cup qualifiers with Comoros, and go into their next set of fixtures determined to put behind them a horror three-month run at the end of last year.

The qualifiers for the upcoming Cup of Nations finals in Morocco were crammed into a three-month spell from September to November and saw Ghana crash badly despite an exciting-looking team. They had a disastrous campaign, finishing rock bottom of their group – a pool featuring Angola, Sudan and Niger – and embarrassingly failed to win a single game.

But head coach Otto Addo somehow survived the calamity, with the Ghana Football Association deciding to prop him up with specialist assistance for the remaining six World Cup qualifiers this year.

Born in Germany but of Ghanaian heritage, Addo was first appointed ahead of the last World Cup despite never previously holding down a senior job, rather working in the academy at his old club Borussia Dortmund.

Addo was assisted in Qatar by Chris Hughton, who sat up in the stands among the press and relayed advice to the young coach on the bench. Hughton then took over after the 2022 World Cup finals but, when Ghana were bundled out at the first stage of the Cup of Nations finals in the Ivory Coast in early 2024, was summarily dismissed. Addo returned to oversee a potentially vital 2-1 away win over main rivals Mali in the World Cup qualifiers last June but then took charge of a mistake-a-minute Cup of Nations qualifying campaign where nothing went right.

He will now have another senior advisor in Winfried Schafer, the 75-year-old German who took Cameroon to the African title in 2002 having first made his name when Karlsruhe came up to the Bundesliga.

Coach Otto Addo will now have a senior advisor in Winfried Schafer, the 75-year-old German who took Cameroon to the African title in 2002

Ghana have also employed an analyst and sports psychologist from Belgium to prop up their technical staff, hoping to put behind them the demons of the last six months.

They resume their 2026 World Cup qualification campaign at home to Chad and away to Madagascar – two fixtures perfect for getting back on track.

Mark Gleeson

Still in charge ...head coach Otto Addo

ALL CHANGE ACROSS ASIA

A number of new teams are competing for a World Cup spot, and a number of new faces are taking their places in the dugouts

It's almost easier to count the Asian nations that haven't changed coaches since the start of 2026 World Cup qualification back in 2023 than the ones who have. The latest was shocking, if not surprising. Indonesia's last qualifier was a famous 2-0 win over Saudi Arabia in Jakarta in November. In January, Shin Tae-yong, who has been in charge of the team's best-ever period, was dismissed. With the majority of the team now made up of naturalised Dutch-born players, in came ex-*Oranje* striker Patrick Kluivert.

With four of the ten games in the third round remaining, the two March matches are crucial for all 18 remaining teams. The top two from each of the three groups of six qualify automatically for the World Cup, while those that end in third and fourth advance to a further round for the two remaining places and the inter-confederation play-off spot.

Indonesia are in the mix in Group C, the most competitive of all. Japan are way out in front with 16 points, nine clear of Australia. Then, just a point behind, are Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and China. It's a fierce five-way fight for that second spot.

Every game is huge, especially Kluivert's first, as he takes Team Garuda to face a Socceroos side who swapped Graham Arnold for Tony Popovic in September. At one time nobody would have given the Southeast Asians a chance Down Under, but their sudden injection of European experience makes the current team a completely different prospect. Since Kluivert got the nod, three more have kissed the red and white flag in ceremonies held in European embassies, all playing second-tier football. They were Ole Romeny of Oxford United and Dutch-based duo, Emmen's Tim Geypens and Dion Markx of TOP Oss.

Kluivert's coaching CV is not as impressive as that of his playing career, but he does have relevant experience for the task at hand having led Curacao – another team with a number of Dutch-born players in their ranks – between March 2015 and June 2016. Thanks to his groundwork as head coach and also as strategic advisor, the Caribbeans qualified for the 2017 CONCACAF Gold Cup, but taking Indonesia to a World Cup would be a bigger achievement altogether. The country of 270 million is desperate for footballing success, and the pressure will be on Kluivert from the start.

At one time nobody would have given Indonesia a chance Down Under, but their sudden injection of European experience makes the current team a completely different prospect

Under pressure... returning Saudi Arabia coach Herve Renard needs a result in March

He will not be alone in that. Saudi Arabia host China in sore need of a win, as Herve Renard's return to Riyadh in October to replace Roberto Mancini hasn't gone well so far. The Green Falcons haven't even scored a goal since Hassan Kadesh's 90th-minute winner in China in September secured their only victory so far. In six hours of football since, Saudi Arabia haven't found the target once. China, meanwhile, have bounced back from that loss, which came just days after a 7-0 thrashing in Japan, and are in the running.

What could be a factor is that Australia and Saudi Arabia, with 12 World Cup appearances between them, would see finishing in third and fourth as a failure. In contrast, China, the unpredictable Bahrain and Indonesia with two combined appearances (if you count the latter's 1938 visit as the Dutch East Indies) wouldn't regard it as a disaster at all.

Elsewhere, the battles for the top two spots are less fierce. In Group A,

In contention... Indonesia's new-look squad has given them a real shot of qualifying

Iran are six points clear of the United Arab Emirates in third and, barring a collapse, are set for a fourth successive appearance. The question is whether Uzbekistan, in second, three points behind the leaders and three above the UAE, can hold their nerve. A home win against Kyrgyzstan would put the White Wolves within touching distance as long as the UAE lose in Tehran on the same day. Asian champions Qatar, six points off the automatic spots, need victories against North Korea and Kyrgyzstan to have any chance of an automatic spot. The best those bottom two can hope for is fourth.

If there are, just about, four teams in the running for the top two in Group A, it looks to be three in Group B. South Korea are in control, especially with three of the four games remaining at home. Wins against Oman and Jordan in Seoul would be enough for an 11th successive appearance. Jordan are in third, two points behind Iraq. Those two will likely compete for second, leaving the loser and one of Oman, Kuwait and Palestine going for third or fourth.

Two good results in March will be enough for many, but there are sure to be lots of twists and turns.

John Duerden

ASIA'S CHOKERS NO LONGER?

Ready to rid themselves of the chokers tag ...Uzbekistan at last year's Asian Cup in Qatar

It's almost a cliché in Asia that Uzbekistan are the continent's chokers but the label could soon be removed forever. The Central Asians have managed to avoid going to the World Cup just when it was within reach. The first near-miss came in the continental play-off for the 2006 World Cup, when a win against Bahrain would have meant a final elimination match against Trinidad & Tobago. That failure – two draws but a defeat on away goals – was painful enough but, in 2014, the team missed out on an automatic spot by virtue of the narrowest goal-difference margin and then, in 2018, a victory over South Korea at home in the final game would have meant a place in Russia.

Things are different now, or should be. The White Wolves are three points clear of the United Arab Emirates in the second of Group A's automatic spots with four games of the ten remaining. The nation has had success at youth level and its players are increasingly headed to Europe, with centre-back Abdukodir Khusanov's January move to Manchester City just the highest-profile.

Key man... Abbosbek Fayzullaev

The third round of 2026 qualification started well with wins over Kyrgyzstan, North Korea (the weakest two of the six teams), a draw with leaders Iran and a vital victory over the UAE, rivals for that second spot. Then old fears started to surface. Two goals down in Qatar, young star Abbosbek Fayzullaev hit back with a late brace. Here seemed to be a steelier version of Uzbekistan, but the hosts won the game with a goal in the 12th minute of added time. The Central Asians responded by beating North Korea 1-0 in Laos, thanks to another goal from their talented CSKA Moscow winger Fayzullaev.

Then in January came a big setback as coach Srecko Katanec resigned due to ill health. The Slovenian had been in place since August 2021 and had introduced a whole bunch of talented youngsters, made the team tactically more flexible and instilled belief. He has been replaced by one of the country's most decorated players, Timur Kapadze, who also has a decent coaching resume, leading the Under-23 team to the final of the Asian Cup in 2022 and 2024. With over 100 caps as a player, he knows the national team really well and also knows the youngsters.

All he has to do is take the senior team to the top two in Group A. Manage that and Uzbekistan's rise to the top ranks of Asian football will be hard to deny and the old clichés will fall by the wayside.

John Duerden

TUCHEL'S ENGLAND KICK THINGS OFF IN EUROPE

With most of Europe's other leading nations involved in the Nations League quarter-finals, the Three Lions dominate the World Cup qualifying spotlight

Friday, March 21, 2025 is a date underlined in triplicate in the diary of elite German coach Thomas Tuchel, who will be making his debut as England supremo that night in a World Cup qualifier at Wembley against Albania.

Tuchel has brought his own distinctive brand of innovative teaching methods and uncompromising will-to-win to a host of top European clubs – Chelsea, Borussia Dortmund, Paris Saint-Germain and Bayern Munich – but has never plied his trade with a national team. No doubt he will need time to affect the transition from the daily grind of the club game to the relatively sparse calendar of the flag-bearing fraternity.

Sven-Goran Eriksson and Fabio Capello, the two other foreigners to have led England, both won their first match in charge of the Three Lions and the smart money has to be on Tuchel following suit. Albania's three previous visits to North London have all ended in defeat, with a dozen goals conceded and zero scored.

Not that the Albanians will be perusing the history books and quaking in their boots. They have an excellent coach in the Brazilian Sylvinho – a former left-back for Arsenal and Barcelona – and reached the European Championships in 2016 and 2024. Tuchel will not need reminding that Sylvinho's side were good enough to top their Euro 2024 qualification group, only losing one game in eight.

The current Albanian national team crop is by no means lacking in solid European experience either. Engine-room battler Kristjan Asllani plays for Italian behemoth Inter; schemer Nedim Bajrami earns his corn with Rangers in Scotland; and attacking midfielder Qazim Laci has been featuring in the Champions League this term for Czech champions Sparta Prague.

"Ours is a strong and difficult group [with England and Serbia as the top seeds]," says Sylvinho. "It's a group to compete in, to fight in and go all the way. Dreaming of going to the World Cup gives you a lot of energy. We need to make as few mistakes as possible if we want to move forward."

The new-look Three Lions return to Wembley three days later for more Group K action, this time playing host to Latvia, who have never faced England at senior level before.

Tuchel is not the only coach about to tuck into his first course of World Cup qualification. New Wales boss Craig Bellamy, who replaced Rob Page in the Cymru technical area at the start of the season, also has fresh frontiers to conquer and will be hoping to pick up at least four points out of six from his team's opening two encounters in Group J: a home game with Kazakhstan in Cardiff and the more problematic trip to Skopje to face North Macedonia.

Positive start...Wales begin their World Cup qualifying campaign under Craig Bellamy

The Macedonians are certainly no slouches. Coach Blagoja Milevski, in charge since 2021, has built a side high on cohesion as well as character and in skipper Enis Bardhi (Bodrum) and Eljif Elmas (Torino), they boast a pair of fine attacking midfielders.

But optimism in the Welsh camp

Sven-Goran Eriksson and Fabio Capello, the two other foreigners to have led England, both won their first match in charge of the Three Lions

First game... England boss Thomas Tuchel

is rightfully sky-high. Bellamy's side were most impressive in his first six games in charge last autumn, remaining undefeated in their Nations League group and causing no end of problems to opponents with their high-energy, high-intensity approach. Who would have guessed that Bellamy, once infamous as a bad boy forward for Norwich, Newcastle, Blackburn and Wales, would develop into such an outstanding leader of men. Under him, Wales seem a revitalised force.

With most of the leading European nations – bar England – only beginning their World Cup qualifying programme later in the year, the field is clear for the March early risers to get ahead of the game, grab a handful of points and build some much-needed momentum. Especially keen to make a flying start will be those nations whose standards have slipped. Poland, who made a winless early exit from Euro 2024, will be aiming for a maximum points haul from home ties in Group G against Lithuania and Malta, while Norway, spearheaded by Premier League stars Erling Haaland and Martin Odegaard, cannot afford any slip-ups in springtime tussles with Moldova and Israel in Group I.

The Norwegians have not played in a World Cup since 1998. It's high time that barren run came to an end.

Nick Bidwell

GROUP STAGE DRAW

The final draw will be confirmed after the Nations League quarter-finals

Re-match ...Turkey and Georgia produced a thriller at Euro 2024

Ending the wait...can Erling Haaland fire Norway to 2026?

GROUP A
- Germany/Italy
- Slovakia
- Northern Ireland
- Luxembourg

GROUP B
- Switzerland
- Sweden
- Slovenia
- Kosovo

GROUP C
- Portugal/Denmark
- Greece
- Scotland
- Belarus

GROUP D
- France/Croatia
- Ukraine
- Iceland
- Azerbaijan

GROUP E
- Spain/Netherlands
- Turkey
- Georgia
- Bulgaria

GROUP F
- Portugal/Denmark
- Hungary
- Republic of Ireland
- Armenia

GROUP G
- Spain/Netherlands
- Poland
- Finland
- Lithuania
- Malta

GROUP H
- Austria
- Romania
- Bosnia & Herzegovina
- Cyprus
- San Marino

GROUP I
- Germany/Italy
- Norway
- Israel
- Estonia
- Moldova

GROUP J
- Belgium
- Wales
- North Macedonia
- Kazakhstan
- Liechtenstein

GROUP K
- England
- Serbia
- Albania
- Latvia
- Andorra

GROUP L
- France/Croatia
- Czech Republic
- Montenegro
- Faroe Islands
- Gibraltar

AFRICA Section

● *9 direct slots available, plus 1 play-off slot*

GROUP A

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Egypt	4	3	1	0	11	2	10
Guinea-Bissau	4	1	3	0	3	2	6
Burkina Faso	4	1	2	1	7	5	5
Sierra Leone	4	1	2	1	4	5	5
Ethiopia	4	0	3	1	1	4	3
Djibouti	4	0	1	3	2	10	1

Mar 20-22: Burkina Faso v Djibouti; Sierra Leone v Guinea-Bissau; Ethiopia v Egypt
Mar 23-25: Guinea-Bissau v Burkina Faso; Egypt v Sierra Leone; Ethiopia v Djibouti
Sep 4-6: Guinea-Bissau v Sierra Leone; Djibouti v Burkina Faso; Egypt v Ethiopia
Sep 7-9: Burkina Faso v Egypt; Guinea-Bissau v Djibouti; Sierra Leone v Ethiopia
Oct 9-11: Djibouti v Egypt; Sierra Leone v Burkina Faso; Ethiopia v Guinea-Bissau
Oct 12-14: Burkina Faso v Ethiopia; Djibouti v Sierra Leone; Egypt v Guinea-Bissau

GROUP B

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Sudan	4	3	1	0	7	1	10
Senegal	4	2	2	0	6	1	8
DR Congo	4	2	1	1	4	2	7
Togo	4	0	3	1	2	3	3
South Sudan	4	0	2	2	1	8	2
Mauritania	4	0	1	3	0	5	1

Mar 20-22: DR Congo v South Sudan; Togo v Mauritania; Sudan v Senegal
Mar 23-25: Mauritania v DR Congo; Senegal v Togo; Sudan v South Sudan
Sep 4-6: Mauritania v Togo; South Sudan v DR Congo; Senegal v Sudan
Sep 7-9: DR Congo v Senegal; Togo v Sudan; Mauritania v South Sudan
Oct 9-11: South Sudan v Senegal; Togo v DR Congo; Sudan v Mauritania
Oct 12-14: DR Congo v Sudan; South Sudan v Togo; Senegal v Mauritania

GROUP C

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Rwanda	4	2	1	1	3	1	7
South Africa	4	2	1	1	6	5	7
Benin	4	2	1	1	4	3	7
Lesotho	4	1	2	1	3	2	5
Nigeria	4	0	3	1	4	5	3
Zimbabwe	4	0	2	2	2	6	2

Mar 20-22: South Africa v Lesotho; Zimbabwe v Benin; Rwanda v Nigeria
Mar 23-25: Benin v South Africa; Nigeria v Zimbabwe; Rwanda v Lesotho
Sep 4-6: Benin v Zimbabwe; Lesotho v South Africa; Nigeria v Rwanda
Sep 7-9: South Africa v Nigeria; Benin v Lesotho; Zimbabwe v Rwanda
Oct 9-11: Lesotho v Nigeria; Zimbabwe v South Africa; Rwanda v Benin
Oct 12-14: South Africa v Rwanda; Lesotho v Zimbabwe; Nigeria v Benin

GROUP D

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Cameroon	4	2	2	0	9	3	8
Libya	4	2	1	1	4	3	7
Cape Verde	4	2	1	1	4	4	7
Angola	4	1	3	0	2	1	6
Mauritius	4	1	1	2	3	6	4
Eswatini	4	0	0	4	1	6	0

Mar 20-22: Cape Verde v Mauritius; Libya v Angola; Eswatini v Cameroon
Mar 23-25: Angola v Cape Verde; Cameroon v Libya; Eswatini v Mauritius
Sep 4-6: Angola v Libya; Mauritius v Cape Verde; Cameroon v Eswatini
Sep 7-9: Cape Verde v Cameroon; Angola v Mauritius; Libya v Eswatini
Oct 9-11: Mauritius v Cameroon; Libya v Cape Verde; Eswatini v Angola
Oct 12-14: Cape Verde v Eswatini; Mauritius v Libya; Cameroon v Angola

GROUP E

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Morocco	3	3	0	0	10	1	9
Niger	3	2	0	1	5	2	6
Tanzania	3	2	0	1	2	2	6
Zambia	4	1	0	3	6	7	3
Congo	3	0	0	3	2	13	0
Eritrea*	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

*Withdrew

African contenders... Cameroon and Cape Verde are both eyeing top spot in Group D

Mar 20-22: Tanzania v Congo; Niger v Morocco
Mar 23-25: Congo v Zambia; Morocco v Tanzania
Sep 4-6: Congo v Tanzania; Morocco v Niger
Sep 7-9: Zambia v Morocco; Tanzania v Niger
Oct 9-11: Tanzania v Zambia; Niger v Congo
Oct 12-14: Zambia v Niger; Morocco v Congo

GROUP F

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Ivory Coast	4	3	1	0	12	0	10
Gabon	4	3	0	1	7	5	9
Burundi	4	2	1	1	8	6	7
Kenya	4	1	2	1	7	3	5
Gambia	4	1	0	3	9	9	3
Seychelles	4	0	0	4	2	22	0

Mar 20-22: Gabon v Seychelles; Gambia v Kenya; Burundi v Ivory Coast
Mar 23-25: Kenya v Gabon; Ivory Coast v Gambia; Burundi v Seychelles
Sep 4-6: Kenya v Gambia; Seychelles v Gabon; Ivory Coast v Burundi
Sep 7-9: Gabon v Ivory Coast; Kenya v Seychelles; Gambia v Burundi
Oct 9-11: Seychelles v Ivory Coast; Gambia v Gabon; Burundi v Kenya
Oct 12-14: Gabon v Burundi; Seychelles v Gambia; Ivory Coast v Kenya

GROUP G

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Algeria	4	3	0	1	8	4	9
Mozambique	4	3	0	1	6	5	9
Botswana	4	2	0	2	6	5	6
Guinea	4	2	0	2	4	4	6
Uganda	4	2	0	2	4	4	6
Somalia	4	0	0	4	3	9	0

Mar 20-22: Guinea v Somalia; Botswana v Algeria; Mozambique v Uganda
Mar 23-25: Uganda v Guinea; Algeria v Mozambique; Botswana v Somalia
Sep 4-6: Uganda v Mozambique; Somalia v Guinea; Algeria v Botswana
Sep 7-9: Guinea v Algeria; Uganda v Somalia; Mozambique v Botswana
Oct 9-11: Somalia v Algeria; Botswana v Uganda; Mozambique v Guinea
Oct 12-14: Guinea v Botswana; Somalia v Mozambique; Algeria v Uganda

GROUP H

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Tunisia	4	3	1	0	6	0	10
Namibia	4	2	2	0	6	1	8
Liberia	4	2	1	1	5	2	7
Malawi	4	2	0	2	4	3	6
Equatorial Guinea	4	1	0	3	1	7	3
Sao Tome & Principe	4	0	0	4	1	10	0

Mar 20-22: Equatorial Guinea v Sao Tome & Principe; Malawi v Namibia; Liberia v Tunisia
Mar 23-25: Namibia v Equatorial Guinea; Tunisia v Malawi; Liberia v Sao Tome & Principe
Sep 4-6: Namibia v Malawi; Sao Tome & Principe v Equatorial Guinea; Tunisia v Liberia
Sep 7-9: Equatorial Guinea v Tunisia; Namibia v Sao Tome & Principe; Malawi v Liberia
Oct 9-11: Sao Tome & Principe v Tunisia; Malawi v Equatorial Guinea; Liberia v Namibia
Oct 12-14: Equatorial Guinea v Liberia; Sao Tome & Principe v Malawi; Tunisia v Namibia

GROUP I

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Comoros	4	3	0	1	8	4	9
Ghana	4	3	0	1	7	5	9
Madagascar	4	2	1	1	5	2	7
Mali	4	1	2	1	5	4	5
Central African Rep	4	1	1	2	7	9	4
Chad	4	0	0	4	1	9	0

Mar 20-22: Ghana v Chad; Central African Republic v Madagascar; Comoros v Mali
Mar 23-25: Madagascar v Ghana; Central African Republic v Mali; Comoros v Chad
Sep 4-6: Madagascar v Central African Republic; Chad v Ghana; Mali v Comoros
Sep 7-9: Ghana v Mali; Madagascar v Chad; Central African Republic v Comoros
Oct 9-11: Chad v Mali; Central African Republic v Ghana; Comoros v Madagascar
Oct 12-14: Ghana v Comoros; Chad v Central African Republic; Mali v Madagascar

● *The nine group winners qualify for the finals; the four best runners-up enter the second round play-offs with the winners advancing to the inter-confederation play-offs*

ASIA Section

● *8 direct slots available, plus 1 play-off slot*

Third Round

GROUP A

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Iran	6	5	1	0	12	5	16
Uzbekistan	6	4	1	1	8	5	13
UAE	6	3	1	2	12	4	10
Qatar	6	2	1	3	10	17	7
Kyrgyzstan	6	1	0	5	6	13	3
North Korea	6	0	2	4	5	9	2

Mar 20: Iran v United Arab Emirates; Uzbekistan v Kyrgyzstan; Qatar v North Korea
Mar 25: Iran v Uzbekistan; Kyrgyzstan v Qatar; North Korea v United Arab Emirates
Jun 5: Qatar v Iran; United Arab Emirates v Uzbekistan; North Korea v Kyrgyzstan

Group A table toppers...Iran's fans cheer on their team

Jun 10: Iran v North Korea; Uzbekistan v Qatar; Kyrgyzstan v United Arab Emirates

GROUP B

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
South Korea	6	4	2	0	12	5	14
Iraq	6	3	2	1	5	3	11
Jordan	6	2	3	1	9	5	9
Oman	6	2	0	4	6	9	6
Kuwait	6	0	4	2	5	11	4
Palestine	6	0	3	3	4	8	3

Mar 20: South Korea v Oman; Iraq v Kuwait; Jordan v Palestine
Mar 25: South Korea v Jordan; Palestine v Iraq; Kuwait v Oman
Jun 5: Iraq v South Korea; Oman v Jordan; Kuwait v Palestine
Jun 10: South Korea v Kuwait; Jordan v Iraq; Palestine v Oman

GROUP C

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Japan	6	5	1	0	22	2	16
Australia	6	1	4	1	6	5	7
Indonesia	6	1	3	2	6	9	6
Saudi Arabia	6	1	3	2	3	6	6
Bahrain	6	1	3	2	5	10	6
China	6	2	0	4	6	16	6

Mar 20: Australia v Indonesia; Japan v Bahrain; Saudi Arabia v China
Mar 25: Japan v Saudi Arabia; China v Australia; Indonesia v Bahrain
Jun 5: Australia v Japan; Indonesia v China; Bahrain v Saudi Arabia
Jun 10: Japan v Indonesia; China v Bahrain; Saudi Arabia v Australia

● *The top two teams in each group qualify for the finals; the third and fourth-placed teams advance to the fourth round to compete for two further finals slots and a fifth round place, the winners of which will enter the inter-confederation play-offs*

OCEANIA Section

● *1 direct slot available, plus 1 play-off slot*

Third Round

Mar 21:
New Caledonia v Tahiti; New Zealand v Fiji
Mar 24: Final

● *The winners qualify for the finals; the runners-up enter the inter-confederation play-offs*

EUROPE Section

● *16 direct slots available*

Group A

Sep 4: Luxembourg v Northern Ireland; Slovakia v Germany or Italy
Sep 7: Luxembourg v Slovakia; Germany or Italy v Northern Ireland
Oct 10: Northern Ireland v Slovakia; Germany or Italy v Luxembourg
Oct 13: Northern Ireland v Germany or Italy; Slovakia v Luxembourg
Nov 14: Luxembourg v Germany or Italy; Slovakia v Northern Ireland
Nov 17: Northern Ireland v Luxembourg; Germany or Italy v Slovakia

Group B

Sep 5:
Slovenia v Sweden; Switzerland v Kosovo
Sep 8:
Kosovo v Sweden; Switzerland v Slovenia
Oct 10:
Kosovo v Slovenia; Sweden v Switzerland
Oct 13:
Slovenia v Switzerland; Sweden v Kosovo
Nov 15:
Slovenia v Kosovo; Switzerland v Sweden
Nov 18:
Kosovo v Switzerland; Sweden v Slovenia

Group C

Sep 5:
Greece v Belarus; Portugal or Denmark v Scotland
Sep 8:
Belarus v Scotland; Greece v Portugal or Denmark
Oct 9:
Belarus v Portugal or Denmark; Scotland v Greece

Oct 12:
Scotland v Belarus; Portugal or Denmark v Greece
Nov 15:
Greece v Scotland; Portugal or Denmark v Belarus
Nov 18:
Belarus v Greece; Scotland v Portugal or Denmark

Group D

Sep 5:
Iceland v Azerbaijan; Ukraine v France or Croatia
Sep 9:
Azerbaijan v Ukraine; France or Croatia v Iceland
Oct 10:
Iceland v Ukraine; France or Croatia v Azerbaijan
Oct 13:
Iceland v France or Croatia; Ukraine v Azerbaijan
Nov 13:
Azerbaijan v Iceland; France or Croatia v Ukraine
Nov 16:
Azerbaijan v France or Croatia; Ukraine v Iceland

Group E

Sep 4:
Georgia v Turkey; Bulgaria v Spain or Netherlands
Sep 7:
Georgia v Bulgaria; Turkey v Spain or Netherlands
Oct 11:
Bulgaria v Turkey; Spain or Netherlands v Georgia
Oct 14:
Turkey v Georgia; Spain or Netherlands v Bulgaria
Nov 15:
Georgia v Spain or Netherlands; Turkey v Bulgaria
Nov 18:
Bulgaria v Georgia; Spain or Netherlands v Turkey

Group F

Group F foes... Ireland and Hungary met in a friendly last June

Sep 6: Armenia v Portugal or Denmark; Republic of Ireland v Hungary
Sep 9: Armenia v Republic of Ireland; Hungary v Portugal or Denmark
Oct 11: Hungary v Armenia; Portugal or Denmark v Republic of Ireland
Oct 14: Republic of Ireland v Armenia; Portugal or Denmark v Hungary
Nov 13: Armenia v Hungary; Republic of Ireland v Portugal or Denmark
Nov 16: Hungary v Republic of Ireland; Portugal or Denmark v Armenia

Group G

Mar 21: Malta v Finland; Poland v Lithuania
Mar 24: Lithuania v Finland; Poland v Malta
Jun 7:
Malta v Lithuania; Finland v Spain or Netherlands
Jun 10:
Finland v Poland; Spain or Netherlands v Malta
Sep 4:
Lithuania v Malta; Spain or Netherlands v Poland
Sep 7:
Lithuania v Spain or Netherlands; Poland v Finland
Oct 9:
Finland v Lithuania; Malta v Spain or Netherlands
Oct 12:
Lithuania v Poland; Spain or Netherlands v Finland
Nov 14:
Finland v Malta; Poland v Spain or Netherlands
Nov 17:
Malta v Poland; Spain or Netherlands v Lithuania

Group H

Mar 21: Cyprus v San Marino; Romania v Bosnia & Herzegovina
Mar 24: Bosnia & Herzegovina v Cyprus; San Marino v Romania
Jun 7: Bosnia & Herzegovina v San Marino; Austria v Romania
Jun 10: Romania v Cyprus; San Marino v Austria
Sep 6: Austria v Cyprus; San Marino v Bosnia & Herzegovina
Sep 9: Bosnia & Herzegovina v Austria; Cyprus v Romania
Oct 9: Austria v San Marino; Cyprus v Bosnia & Herzegovina
Oct 12: San Marino v Cyprus; Romania v Austria
Nov 15: Cyprus v Austria; Bosnia & Herzegovina v Romania
Nov 18: Austria v Bosnia & Herzegovina; Romania v San Marino

Group I

Mar 22: Moldova v Norway; Israel v Estonia
Mar 25: Israel v Norway; Moldova v Estonia
Jun 6:
Estonia v Israel; Norway v Germany or Italy
Jun 9:
Estonia v Norway; Germany or Italy v Moldova
Sep 5:
Moldova v Israel; Germany or Italy v Estonia
Sep 8-9:
Israel v Germany or Italy; Norway v Moldova
Oct 11:
Norway v Israel; Estonia v Germany or Italy
Oct 14:
Estonia v Moldova; Germany or Italy v Israel
Nov 13:
Norway v Estonia; Moldova v Germany or Italy
Nov 16:
Israel v Moldova; Germany or Italy v Norway

Group J

Mar 22: Liechtenstein v North Macedonia; Wales v Kazakhstan
Mar 25: Liechtenstein v Kazakhstan; North Macedonia v Wales
Jun 6: North Macedonia v Belgium; Wales v Liechtenstein
Jun 9: Kazakhstan v North Macedonia; Belgium v Wales
Sep 4: Kazakhstan v Wales; Liechtenstein v Belgium
Sep 7: North Macedonia v Liechtenstein; Belgium v Kazakhstan
Oct 10: Kazakhstan v Liechtenstein; Belgium v North Macedonia
Oct 13: North Macedonia v Kazakhstan; Wales v Belgium
Nov 15: Kazakhstan v Belgium; Liechtenstein v Wales
Nov 18: Belgium v Liechtenstein; Wales v North Macedonia

Group K

Mar 21: Andorra v Latvia; England v Albania
Mar 24: Albania v Andorra; England v Latvia
Jun 7: Andorra v England; Albania v Serbia
Jun 10: Latvia v Albania; Serbia v Andorra
Sep 6: Latvia v Serbia; England v Andorra
Sep 9: Albania v Latvia; Serbia v England
Oct 11: Latvia v Andorra; Serbia v Albania
Oct 14: Andorra v Serbia; Latvia v England
Nov 13: Andorra v Albania; England v Serbia
Nov 16: Albania v England; Serbia v Latvia

Group L

Mar 22: Montenegro v Gibraltar; Czech Republic v Faroe Islands
Mar 25: Gibraltar v Czech Republic; Montenegro v Faroe Islands
Jun 6: Czech Republic v Montenegro; Gibraltar v France or Croatia
Jun 9: Faroe Islands v Gibraltar; France or Croatia v Czech Republic
Sep 5: Faroe Islands v France or Croatia; Montenegro v Czech Republic
Sep 8: Gibraltar v Faroe Islands; France or Croatia v Montenegro
Oct 9: Czech Republic v France or Croatia; Faroe Islands v Montenegro
Oct 12: Faroe Islands v Czech Republic; France or Croatia v Gibraltar
Nov 14: Gibraltar v Montenegro; France or Croatia v Faroe Islands
Nov 17: Czech Republic v Gibraltar; Montenegro v France or Croatia

● *The 12 group winners qualify for the finals; the 12 runners-up enter the second round play-offs alongside the four best-performing 2024-25 UEFA Nations League group winners/teams that don't finish in the top two places in the group stage*

CONCACAF... Honduras look set to advance to the third round

CONCACAF Section

● *3 direct slots available, plus 2 play-off slots (along with the 3 host nations)*

Second Round

GROUP A
Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Honduras	2	2	0	0	9	2	6
Cuba	2	1	0	1	4	3	3
Cayman Islands	2	1	0	1	1	3	3
Antigua & Barbuda	2	0	1	1	1	2	1
Bermuda	2	0	1	1	2	7	1

Jun 4: Bermuda v Cayman Islands
Jun 6-7: Antigua & Barbuda v Cuba; Cayman Islands v Honduras
Jun 10: Cuba v Bermuda; Honduras v Antigua & Barbuda

GROUP B
Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Costa Rica	2	2	0	0	7	0	6
Trinidad & Tobago	2	1	1	0	9	3	4
St Kitts & Nevis	2	1	0	1	1	4	3
Grenada	2	0	1	1	2	5	1
Bahamas	2	0	0	2	1	8	0

Jun 4: Grenada v Bahamas
Jun 6-7: Trinidad & Tobago v St Kitts & Nevis; Bahamas v Costa Rica
Jun 10: St Kitts & Nevis v Grenada; Costa Rica v Trinidad & Tobago

South American clash...strugglers Venezuela and Chile fight for the ball in a November qualifier

GROUP C
Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Curacao	2	2	0	0	6	1	6
Haiti	2	2	0	0	5	2	6
St Lucia	2	0	1	1	3	4	1
Aruba	2	0	1	1	2	4	1
Barbados	2	0	0	2	2	7	0

Jun 4: Barbados v Aruba
Jun 6-7: Curacao v St Lucia; Aruba v Haiti
Jun 10: St Lucia v Barbados; Haiti v Curacao

GROUP D
Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Nicaragua	2	2	0	0	8	1	6
Panama	2	2	0	0	5	1	6
Guyana	2	1	0	1	3	3	3
Montserrat	2	0	0	2	2	7	0
Belize	2	0	0	2	1	7	0

Jun 4: Montserrat v Belize
Jun 6-7: Nicaragua v Guyana; Belize v Panama
Jun 10:
Guyana v Montserrat; Panama v Nicaragua

GROUP E
Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Guatemala	2	2	0	0	9	0	6
Jamaica	2	2	0	0	4	2	6
Dominican Rep	2	1	0	1	4	1	3
Dominica	2	0	0	2	2	9	0
British Virgin Islands	2	0	0	2	0	7	0

Jun 4: Dominica v British Virgin Islands
Jun 6-7: Guatemala v Dominican Republic; British Virgin Islands v Jamaica
Jun 10: Dominican Republic v Dominica; Jamaica v Guatemala

GROUP F
Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Suriname	2	2	0	0	8	1	6
Puerto Rico	2	1	1	0	8	0	4
El Salvador	2	1	1	0	3	1	4
St Vincent & Gren	2	0	0	2	2	7	0
Anguilla	2	0	0	2	0	12	0

Jun 4: St Vincent & Grenadines v Anguilla
Jun 6-7: Suriname v Puerto Rico; Anguilla v El Salvador
Jun 10: Puerto Rico v St Vincent & Grenadines; El Salvador v Suriname

● *The top two teams in each group advance to the third round to compete for the three finals slots and two slots in the inter-confederation play-offs*

SOUTH AMERICA Section

● *6 direct slots available, plus 1 play-off slot*

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Argentina	12	8	1	3	21	7	25
Uruguay	12	5	5	2	17	9	20
Ecuador*	12	6	4	2	11	4	19
Colombia	12	5	4	3	15	10	19
Brazil	12	5	3	4	17	11	18
Paraguay	12	4	5	3	8	7	17
Bolivia	12	4	1	7	13	27	13
Venezuela	12	2	6	4	11	15	12
Chile	12	2	3	7	9	20	9
Peru	12	1	4	7	3	15	7

*Deducted 3 points

Mar 20-21: Paraguay v Chile; Brazil v Colombia; Peru v Bolivia; Ecuador v Venezuela; Uruguay v Argentina
Mar 25: Bolivia v Uruguay; Venezuela v Peru; Colombia v Paraguay; Argentina v Brazil; Chile v Ecuador
Jun 6-7: Colombia v Peru; Venezuela v Bolivia; Paraguay v Uruguay; Chile v Argentina; Ecuador v Brazil
Jun 9-10: Uruguay v Venezuela; Peru v Ecuador; Brazil v Paraguay; Bolivia v Chile; Argentina v Colombia
Sep 4-6: Uruguay v Peru; Colombia v Bolivia; Brazil v Chile; Paraguay v Ecuador; Argentina v Venezuela
Sep 7-9: Peru v Paraguay; Venezuela v Colombia; Bolivia v Brazil; Chile v Uruguay; Ecuador v Argentina

● *The top six teams qualify for the finals; the seventh-placed team enter the inter-confederation play-offs*

THOMAS TUCHEL'S RIGHT-HAND MAN

England's new assistant manager already has a hugely impressive CV

Words: Sean Cole

Everyone expects a new broom to sweep clean. When Thomas Tuchel arrived as Chelsea manager in January 2021, he brought in trusted allies like Zsolt Low and Arno Michels to replace some of the coaches left behind by his predecessor Frank Lampard. Anthony Barry must have feared the worst; young and inexperienced, he had only arrived from Wigan Athletic a few months earlier, and it seemed like his big break was going to end before it had really begun.

But, far from discarding or marginalising him, Tuchel nurtured Barry's talent, accelerating his progress. He became an integral part of Chelsea's turnaround, culminating in Champions League glory later that year.

Tuchel and Barry formed a close relationship, as both friends and colleagues. After working together again at Bayern Munich, and claiming a Bundesliga title, they're now reunited to lead the England national team and have the World Cup in their sights.

"He's very motivated and driven. He wants to succeed," says Michael Jacobs, who was coached by Barry at Wigan. "When you talked to him about his playing career, he probably wasn't naturally gifted with ability, but he was always one of the hardest working. That came across with the amount of time he'd spend away from the training ground doing his research."

An industrious midfielder and Everton academy graduate, who was team-mates with Wayne Rooney at youth level, Barry drifted into the lower leagues with Accrington Stanley, Yeovil Town and others. At 24, a dislocated kneecap sidelined him for well over a year. Forced to reassess his plans, he started coaching and discovered a genuine passion.

After a season with Wrexham in the National League, Barry retired in the summer of 2017 and joined the backroom staff at Wigan under Paul Cook. He had just turned 31. "At that time, he didn't do as much as you'd probably think, because we had other coaches and the manager took a lot of the sessions in terms of tactical shape," recalls Jacobs.

"In the second year, when he was doing his Pro Licence, you saw him produce a different level of coaching because of his analysis of different aspects of the game, especially set-pieces and throw-ins. The longer it went on, the more input he had."

A former Accrington team-mate, and fellow Scouser, Cook mentored Barry. They drove into training together from Liverpool, their boisterous characters contributing to a positive environment. Wigan won the League One title with 98 points and spectacularly dumped Pep Guardiola's Manchester City out of the FA Cup.

Barry assumed more responsibility, making the Latics a serious threat from free-kicks and corners. "We had quite a few assets who could attack the ball. Chey Dunkley, our centre-half, went on a goalscoring run just through the set-piece routines that Anthony brought into the club," adds Jacobs. "You could see that the level of coaching, and the research he put into it, was top level."

His work was meticulous. For Barry's Pro Licence dissertation, which was later published in an academic journal, he analysed the outcome of all 16,380

Right-hand man... Tuchel and Barry on their first day in the job at St George's Park

throw-ins taken during the 2018-19 Premier League season. He concluded that, rather than looking to gain territory, which was often counter-productive, it was generally better to throw the ball sideways or backwards and retain uncontested possession.

This insight changed how the Wigan players thought about throw-ins, which were routinely overlooked and undervalued. "It was very detailed in terms of the percentages of keeping the ball from your throw in different areas of the pitch, and the best ways to do it. It's the rotation of midfielders, your defenders dropping off, and different counter movements to try and keep the ball," explains Jacobs.

"He was very good at getting his point across. We used to do a session, every Thursday morning, as part of a warm-up, where we'd do three throw-ins from each third of the pitch and it would be different ways to get out against different teams. We did it on a weekly basis and, the more you could see it in the game, it made you realise how well it worked."

Lampard and Jody Morris, the Chelsea manager and his assistant, were suitably impressed. They were on the same Pro Licence course as Barry, the star student in a class that also contained Michael Carrick, Kolo Toure and Juan Carlos Osorio. In 2020, with Wigan relegated from the Championship after entering administration, the duo recruited him as a specialist set-piece coach.

Relentlessly self-motivated and assured in his own ability, Barry wasn't fazed by working with global stars. He immediately proved the effectiveness of his approach, earning their respect and a spot in Tuchel's inner circle. That season, Chelsea were the most prolific team in the Premier League from set-pieces, scoring 21 goals.

Alongside his day job, Barry fully embraced a new role with the Republic of Ireland. "At that stage, in COVID, we had some three-game windows, so it could be quite intensive," says Stephen Kenny, the manager who recruited him. "You've got to do a lot of preparation work, but Anthony's very dedicated and an innovative young coach.

"Everyone would go for a run together before breakfast, through Dublin or whatever city we were staying in. He loved it. He's got a warm disposition and a friendly personality. He was extremely popular with all the members of staff."

One generation of Irish players was being phased out and the next brought through, with the likes of Gavin Bazunu, Dara O'Shea and Adam Idah gaining vital experience. Kenny switched to a back three to better suit his squad. Barry coached the same system at Chelsea under Tuchel. Results improved rapidly as Ireland lost only three of their 12 games across 2021.

During this run, they scored direct from set-pieces on five occasions, conceding twice. For the first of these, Kenny showed his appreciation by celebrating with Barry after James McClean put the finishing touch to a clever and intricate corner routine. The next time they faced the same opponents, a Shane Duffy header rounded off a 4-0 win over Qatar.

While Kenny acknowledges this as an area of expertise, he stresses how well rounded Barry's coaching is. "He's a great student of all facets of the game. He's thought-provoking and has a lot of ideas. He enjoys discussion and debate. He thinks a lot, tactically, to illustrate different scenarios and possibilities – the various formations a team might play, the ways they might build up, or press."

After a year with Ireland, Barry joined Belgium – the team on top of the FIFA rankings – in February 2022. The Red Devils manager at the time, Roberto Martinez, had been struck by Barry's knowledge, humility and enthusiasm when they first met at

Coach...Barry on the touchline during his time with Belgium

> "He's a great student of all facets of the game. He's thought-provoking and has a lot of ideas...he thinks a lot, tactically"
>
> Former Republic of Ireland manager Stephen Kenny

Former player...Barry made 74 appearances for Yeovil Town

CIRCLE OF INFLUENCE

THOMAS TUCHEL
A world-class manager and tactician, the German immediately warmed to Barry's committed attitude and detail-oriented coaching style. His patronage opened up new possibilities. The two have become almost inseparable in recent years, with Barry describing Tuchel as "a friend and a role model".

PAUL COOK
Barry's grounding in the lower leagues has made him adaptable and determined. Cook was briefly a team-mate of Barry's at Accrington and then gave him his first senior coaching role, with the duo working together at Wigan for three seasons.

ROBERTO MARTINEZ
The Spaniard headhunted Barry while managing Belgium and then Portugal, enabling him to coach superstars like Kevin De Bruyne and Cristiano Ronaldo at two major tournaments. They share an understanding of what it takes to rise from humble beginnings.

GRAHAM POTTER
Martinez, whose innovative methods inspired Potter, likens Barry to the current West Ham United boss. Both tactically flexible, empathetic and curious about different football cultures, they briefly worked together at Chelsea before Bayern came calling.

the DW Stadium, after Wigan's famous 1-0 win over Manchester City.

Martinez values having a British coach as part of his backroom staff to offer a different perspective – the honesty and intensity he believes is instilled by a more physical football culture. Barry was his first choice to replace the departing Shaun Maloney, and he fulfilled that role well, in addition to overseeing all offensive and defensive set-pieces.

He did the same at club level. Kept on by Graham Potter, at Tuchel's insistence Bayern spent £1 million to prise Barry from Chelsea in April 2023. They dramatically clinched the title on the final day of that season, but the next one unravelled badly. Both left after a trophyless campaign where they trailed Bayer Leverkusen by 18 points.

Working abroad at elite level expanded Barry's horizons and gave him some unique experiences. Despite coaching in English, sprinkled with native phrases picked up in lessons to ensure the purpose of his sessions was clear, top foreign players responded well to him. His Scouse accent was sometimes a source of humour, helping to form strong bonds.

Martinez appreciated his qualities as a coach and a person. After their short time together at Belgium, which ended with a disappointing group-stage exit from the World Cup in Qatar, the Spaniard took the Portugal job and brought Barry along too. He adapted well to another new environment and made a clear impression.

Small gestures can mean a lot. On international camps, Barry enjoyed morning runs with Welsh physical coach Richard Evans. They would often bring back fresh pastel de nata, Portuguese custard tarts, to share with the rest of the staff, demonstrating a desire to make people happy and create a good atmosphere.

This was reflected on the pitch as Portugal qualified for Euro 2024 with a perfect record. They weren't at their fluid best in the tournament itself, being knocked out of the quarter-finals by France on penalties, but have still lost just two of their 21 competitive matches under Martinez. Barry was present for the whole of that run, perfectly implementing the manager's ideas on the training ground.

"I've spoken to him regularly over the years. He's certainly done very well at Chelsea, Bayern Munich, Belgium and Portugal," says Kenny. "He's very humble. Great values. Very personable. He's someone people relate to and like. For a young coach, he's packed a lot of experience into his career. He lives and breathes football."

International experience...Barry followed manager Roberto Martinez from Belgium to Portugal

Barry's growing reputation has led to offers from multiple clubs interested in making him their manager, including Fleetwood Town, Cardiff City and Aberdeen. He turned them down because he felt his development was better served by learning from people like Tuchel and Martinez. Tellingly, despite their different philosophies, Barry fitted in seamlessly with both.

The emotional pull of coaching England was an important factor in his latest move, along with the security of a full-time role and a clear target in next summer's World Cup. There has even been speculation about Barry potentially succeeding Tuchel. Amid all the concern about a scarcity of outstanding English managers, he could be the top candidate to defy that narrative.

Most assume this will be his last assistant post before striking out on his own and, if England fare well under Tuchel, there will be no shortage of interest. Wherever Barry goes from here, those who know him best are convinced he has all the necessary qualities to succeed as a number one.

ASMIR BEGOVIC

"I've not retired. If the federation call, I'll pick up"

The Bosnian discusses his future, life as Everton's back-up goalkeeper, and not giving up on international football

You returned to Everton last summer on a one-year contract, which ends this season. What does the future hold?
My immediate focus is to help the team maintain its Premier League status. I'm 37, in good physical condition and still able to play to a high standard. Come the end of the season, I will assess my options and go for the one that suits me and my family.

Medium to long-term I'm open-minded regarding coaching as I have both UEFA B licences [outfield and goalkeeping]. I speak several languages, have networks in various countries, so a sporting director role would interest me. I'm also enjoying my media work. I want to stay in football in some capacity, but it all depends on being given the right opportunity.

My goalkeeping academy runs in Germany, UK and Bosnia, and we specialise in coaching the future generation of goalkeepers.

How do you keep yourself motivated knowing you probably won't be involved on a matchday?
It's easier with experience to look at the bigger picture. I've not returned as the number one and I accept that. It's about helping the team in other ways such as setting standards, offering mentorship and guidance. The more I push Jordan [Pickford], the team ultimately benefits.

There aren't many clubs where you would be happy to play as back-up, but I have an affinity with Everton and the fans, and I want to help the club any way I can. I train everyday with the same commitment and passion I did when I was a first-team regular, as you just don't know when you will find yourself in goal.

David Moyes has also recently returned to Goodison Park. What are your early impressions of him?
I've noticed his calming presence, a steely determination and focus. He's automatically got the buy-in from everyone because of his previous affiliation. He's vastly experienced at this level. No one is searching online to find out his background – we know all about his achievements.

With the move into a new stadium [next season], it's crucial that we start climbing up the table. The more time we spend with him, we will adapt to his tactics and style of play. Its early days but it feels a good fit.

You've played under Jose Mourinho, Guus Hiddink, Antonio Conte, Rafael Benitez and Tony Pulis. Which one has had the most influence on your career?
Each manager impacts you in different ways. Tony Pulis is a legend because as a young goalkeeper he believed in me and gave me the opportunity to make my name in the Premier League. I'll forever be grateful for that.

At Chelsea, Antonio Conte took my game to another level. He made me realise what it takes to be a Premier League winner. He was relentless. The training sessions had the same level of intensity if not more than the games themselves.

You represented Bosnia & Herzegovina at the 2014 World Cup in Brazil. What memories do you have of the tournament?
It was such a historic, unique occasion on so many levels. We had a special group of players who had been displaced to all four corners of the globe. Some didn't even speak Bosnian. Being on such a stage was beyond football, considering what our nation had endured because of war.

Our opening game was against Argentina at the Maracana. On the one hand, you want to take in the occasion, all your family are in the stands. But on the other hand, you're at work. You have to be professional. They had [Lionel] Messi, [Sergio] Aguero, [Angel] Di Maria and [Javier] Mascherano and we were respectful but not overawed. We had the likes of [Sead] Kolasinac, [Muhamed] Besic, [Miralem] Pjanic and [Edin] Dzeko and we were confident of going up against anyone.

We finished third just a point behind Nigeria so came very close to getting out of the group. Not many players get to play at a World Cup so I'm grateful to have had an opportunity. I will cherish the memories for the rest of my life.

Why hasn't the national team qualified for a major tournament since then?
We were expected to kick on from Brazil. We were being touted as the next big thing in European football. However, the team has been in free-fall for the last ten years. Perhaps we had peaked too early and become victims of our own success.

Bosnia is a complicated country. The complex make-up at government level impacts the governance of football. The best players don't always get picked. People are put in positions of leadership despite lacking the necessary experience and qualification. The main criteria should be a person's ability to play and not their political, religious or ethnic background.

We've come within touching distance of the Euros, especially for 2016. Missing out at the

play-off stage is agonising [Bosnia lost 3-1 on aggregate to the Republic of Ireland]. I played in the match against the Irish and it's a case of so close and yet so far.

Given the limited resources and the small pool of players to choose from, we must have realistic expectations on what the team can achieve. We shouldn't be finishing in the bottom two of a qualifying group, but at the same time we are not going to be in first position. Our level is the play-offs.

You represented Canada at the Under-20 World Cup in 2007. How close did you come to representing them at full international level and what made you ultimately choose Bosnia?
I left Bosnia at the age of four for Germany and moved to Canada at ten. I made my way up the national set-up and my focus was on the national team. In 2009, I had a decision to make, and I can tell you it wasn't an easy one.

There were two key factors, one professional and the other personal. As a player, you want to be up against the world's best players and teams. You want to give yourself the best chance to play in major, high-profile international tournaments, and I felt Bosnia was best suited for me to achieve such aims. On a personal level, I still had family living there, so it gave me the chance to reconnect with the country of my birth.

How has football progressed in Canada from your time growing up in Edmonton?
When I was there, if you wanted to progress your career then you looked at South or Central America. Now you have three teams in the MLS. You have the CPL [Canadian Premier League]. You have dedicated academies, specific stadia for football. There are pathways for younger players. The difference is night and day. They have the World Cup to look forward to next year. The national team has a good mix of youth and experience. It's a country close to my heart and they'll put on a great show.

You have 63 caps for Bosnia & Herzegovina, have you retired from international football?
I've not retired and I'm available for my country. Put it this way, if the federation were to call, I'll pick up.

Interview by Imran Azam

Glenn Moore

History beckons in Champions League

Real Madrid are aiming to reach the semi-finals for the first time in their history, while an unprecedented three English clubs have made it to the last eight of the UEFA competition

While Real Madrid remain the unquestioned kings of the men's Champions League, their women's side are a long way from being queens of the female counterpart.

Having only been in existence for five years, after taking over CD Tacon, which itself did not reach the top flight until 2019, Madrid have been playing catch-up in the women's game. They quickly became good, qualifying for the Champions League every season since 2021, but becoming very good has been more problematic. There is no shame in trailing Barcelona, Europe's best team, in La Liga F, but to have not made so much as a dent in the Champions League is disappointing.

This season they saw off Twente and Celtic easily enough to qualify for the knockout rounds, but lost home and away to group winners Chelsea. As the only team remaining to have never reached a semi-final, they go into the quarter-finals as underdogs.

This is Real's second appearance in the last eight. At least this time they are not facing Barcelona, who beat them 8-3 on aggregate in 2022. Instead it is Arsenal barring their way, one of three English teams still involved – the most any nation has had at this stage.

That number will definitely be reduced in the last four as Manchester City meet Chelsea in one of the other quarter-finals. The winner of that tie will face holders Barcelona or Wolfsburg.

In Madrid's half of the draw they or Arsenal will play Lyon or Bayern Munich. For the first time in the competition all the quarter-finalists come from just four countries: England, Germany, Spain and France. *Las Blancas* have not previously played the Gunners and have a mixed record against other English clubs. Their first European tie was against Manchester City, a Champions League qualifier in 2021, and they followed a home draw with a win in Manchester. They knocked City out again the following year in a one-off play-off qualifier, but have since played Chelsea in three successive group stages, drawing once and losing five.

The last of those meetings was their last European match, and a measure of the team's hold on *Madrilenos* is that, like most of their games, it was held at the 6,000-capacity Alfredo Di Stefano Stadium and drew only 2,057. While Barcelona played quite a few games at Camp Nou before it was closed for refurbishment, and have played several times at the Olympic Stadium at Montjuic (the temporary home of Barcelona's men), Madrid are yet to play at the Bernabeu.

> This is Real Madrid's second appearance in the last eight. Barring their way is Arsenal, one of three English teams still involved – the most any nation has had at this stage

That's one measure of the gulf between the two. The other is on the pitch. Including the transition year, when Real were still called CD Tacon, the teams have met 18 times. Barca have won them all.

Progression to the last four in the Champions League would clearly help Real lift their profile both in Madrid and within the club's upper echelons, but Arsenal have been very impressive since Renee Slegers took over from Jonas Eidevall and will be favourites.

WSL rivals...Chelsea meet Manchester City in the quarter-finals

That would put them in line to play, probably, Lyon, whose quarter-final with Bayern is a repeat of the 2022 last-eight clash, a one-off tie played in Bilbao under COVID restrictions, won by Lyon 2-1 on the way to the seventh of their eight UEFA crowns. If so it would be a reunion for Joe Montemurro, the Australian coach who took Arsenal to the 2019 WSL title, who will be hoping to fare better than when facing the Gunners as Juventus coach in the 2022-23 group stage.

The two legs in the Chelsea-Manchester City tie will be part of an extraordinary set of four matches in 13 days between the teams, who will also face each other in the WSL and League Cup final between March 15 and 27.

Chelsea coach Sonia Bompastor complained at the start of the season that, unlike her experience in the French league with her previous club Lyon, WSL fixtures were not scheduled to best advantage their clubs in Europe. At least on this occasion her opponents have exactly the same issue.

Not that the fixture list seems to trouble Bompastor, who went into March having overseen 24 Chelsea matches producing 23 wins and one draw, leaving her players still waiting to see why she describes herself as "a really bad loser".

Barcelona-Wolfsburg is a repeat of the 2023 final and 2022 semi-final, both won by Barca who will be heavily

Chasing history ...Real Madrid's women have never reached a Champions League semi-final

fancied to again emerge victorious.

It is to be hoped these ties catch the public imagination more successfully than the group stage, with only four of the 48 matches attracting crowds larger than 10,000. Barcelona v Manchester City (29,007) was the highest with Swedish club Hammarby, of Stockholm, surprisingly attracting the next two best, 20,428 against City and 18,746 against Barcelona. Chelsea v Twente (10,500) was the only other five-figure attendance.

The quarter-finals will take place on March 18-19 and 26-27, with the semi-finals on April 19-20 and 26-27. The final is in Lisbon on May 24.

Holders...Barca will be favourites to defend their European crown

KNOCKOUT ROUND DRAW

QUARTER-FINALS

Real Madrid v Arsenal
Bayern Munich v Lyon
Wolfsburg v Barcelona
Manchester City v Chelsea

SEMI-FINALS

Real Madrid/Arsenal v Bayern Munich/Lyon
Wolfsburg/Barcelona v Man City/Chelsea

Round-up

2025 SheBelieves Cup winners... Japan

JAPAN WIN SHEBELIEVES CUP

Japan surprised the United States by winning their hosts' own invitation tournament thanks to a 2-1 win in Snapdragon Stadium in San Diego, California. Goals by Leicester City forward Yuka Momiki and Feyenoord defender Toko Koga inflicted the first defeat of Emma Hayes' reign on the Olympic champions.

"They were a higher level to us throughout," admitted Hayes.

Across group matches also hosted in Texas and Arizona, Japan had earlier defeated Australia 4-0 and Colombia 4-1, teams the US beat 2-1 and 2-0 respectively. In the other group clash Colombia defeated Australia 2-1.

ENGLAND WIN NATIONS LEAGUE CLASH OF CHAMPS

European champions England beat world champions Spain in a re-match at Wembley of the 2023 World Cup final. This was in the UEFA Nations League, which Spain also hold.

Jess Park's first-half goal delighted a 45,000-plus crowd and put England level top of Group A3 with Portugal, with whom they had drawn 1-1 in Portimao a few days earlier.

In other notable clashes, as countries prepare for Euro 2025, Netherlands drew 2-2 with Germany and Sweden won 2-1 in Denmark.

With two matches gone only France (who beat Norway and Iceland) had a 100 per cent record of the 16 League A teams, while Scotland and Belgium were pointless.

Match-winner...Jess Park celebrates her goal against Spain

SHAW MAKES POWER MOVE

Manchester City and Jamaica striker Khadija "Bunny" Shaw responded to receiving racist abuse on social media

Anti-racism gesture... City's Khadija Shaw

by giving a Black Power salute – emulating the iconic gesture made by Tommie Smith and John Carlos at the Mexico 1968 Summer Olympics – after scoring in City's next match.

NWSL TRANSFERS

Trans-Atlantic transfer movement continued ahead of the NWSL's mid-March start with Houston Dash selling Brazilian defender Tarciane to Lyon and US international Jenna Nighswonger joining Arsenal from Gotham FC.

There was also movement the other way. Defender Oihane Hernandez, who played in Spain's successful 2023 World Cup campaign, including a substitute appearance in the final, joined Orlando Pride from Real Madrid. Alanna Kennedy (Australia) and Sandy MacIver (Scotland) left Manchester City for Angel City and Washington Spirit respectively. Also leaving the WSL was France's Kenza Dali, trading Aston Villa for San Diego Wave.

Tarciane's captain in Brazil's 2024 Olympic silver medal-winning team, Adriana, also left the NWSL, for Saudi Arabia's Al Qadsiah but goalkeeper Lorena arrived, joining Kansas City Current from Gremio.

Internally, Venezuela forward Deyna Castellanos swapped Bay FC for Portland Thorns, while Swedish midfielder Evelina Duljan departed Pride for Dash.

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Europe

NICK BIDWELL

Nations League crunch time

Eight teams are bidding for a spot in June's UEFA Nations League finals, while several other countries are fighting for promotion or relegation

Preview

Rivalry renewed ...Germany will take on Italy

The record books suggest that Germany will have a tough time seeing off bogey side Italy when the two giants of the European game go head-to-head in the last eight of the Nations League in late March. In nine clashes with the Italians in major finals, Germany (or West Germany in days of yore) have only triumphed once and even that was on penalties at the quarter-final stage of Euro 2016.

Over the years, Italy have proved time and time again that they know how to stifle the Germans tactically; no doubt *Azzurri* boss Luciano Spalletti will have a few chess moves up his sleeve in this prestigious, high-stakes rendezvous, both in the first leg at Milan's San Siro and for the return in Dortmund three days later.

The great Franz Beckenbauer always referred to his country's games with Italy as "*Der Klassiker*" and Spalletti sees the tie as the ideal stage to make a loud and proud mission statement: "A *Nazionale* coach who does not have the chance to be involved in an Italy-Germany game is like a Milan or Inter coach who does not take part in a derby. Italy v Germany is a vital part of football history."

On current form, Germany will start as favourites, unbeaten in their six Nations League group games and losing only one of their 15 matches in 2024. Under the astute stewardship of *Bundestrainer* Julian Nagelsmann, the Germans are very much on the up again, the resurgence personified by brilliant young attacking midfielders Florian Wirtz and Jamal Musiala.

Italy's back three of Giovanni Di Lorenzo, Alessandro Bastoni and Riccardo Calafiori or Alessandro Buongiorno form an extremely strong unit. But can they keep the free-flowing Germans at bay?

Whoever prevails in the Germany-Italy tie will host the UEFA Nations League final four in June, where they will face the winners of the Denmark-Portugal quarter-final, a match-up

European champions...Spain will be favourites to defend their UEFA Nations League crown

featuring coaches who still have much to prove to their respective audiences and stakeholders.

New Denmark boss Brian Riemer only assumed the hot seat in late October and has been in charge for just two games: a goalless draw in Serbia in Nations League Group A and a 2-1 defeat at home to Spain in the same competition. Riemer, once a highly influential assistant coach at Premier League side Brentford, has had little time to stamp his authority on the Denmark squad and was not exactly a roaring success in his last job, fired by Belgian outfit Anderlecht earlier this season.

Two years after Roberto Martinez became Portugal coach, the domestic jury remains out as to his bottom-line value. With a deep reservoir of talent at his disposal, expectations in the country are huge and quarter-final elimination at Euro 2024 has left the former Wigan Athletic, Everton and Belgium manager exposed. Gliding them through European Championship and Nations League qualification is simply not enough; the Portuguese public demand much more.

One trump card in Martinez's hand are the quality youngsters knocking at the national team door, not least defenders Tomas Araujo (Benfica) and Renato Veiga (Juventus, on loan from Chelsea), Paris Saint-Germain midfielder Joao Neves and another Juventus tyro in winger Francisco Conceicao.

In a remake of the 2010 World Cup final, reigning European champions Spain will do battle with the Netherlands for a last-four berth. Spain coach Luis de la Fuente recently described Ronald Koeman's side as a "really tough rival," though was quick to emphasise the benefit of a backyard second leg in Valencia. "Playing at home in the return gives you the chance to put right any negatives from the first leg. Our support will push us on to overcome."

Koeman will be banking heavily on the exceptional Liverpool trio of Virgil van Dijk, revitalised midfield anchor man Ryan Gravenberch and Cody Gakpo. PSV's gifted winger Noa Lang could come in very useful as an impact substitute.

In the other quarter-final, most would expect France to comfortably see off a Croatia side that is arguably in decline after many years of supremacy. As *Les Bleus* boss Didier Deschamps pointed out, the two teams are no strangers to one another, shortly to cross paths for the fifth and sixth time in the last five years.

Whoever prevails in the Germany-Italy tie will host the UEFA Nations League final four in June

From a French perspective, one topic may well squeeze out all others in the build-up to this tie: Kylian Mbappe's future as captain. The Real Madrid man was booed by his own fans during September's internationals, missed the October games with injury, and was left out by Deschamps in November. A statement performance, with the armband on, would be most welcome.

Aside from the countries aiming to win the Nations League, there are also some intriguing ties involving promotion and relegation in the competition's new upgrade or demotion mechanism.

In the A/B play-offs, the Scotland v Greece game features two sides bang in form. The Scots finished their top tier campaign with two fine results – wins at home to Croatia and away to Poland – while Greece were unfortunate not to pip England to first place in Group B2, accumulating 15 points from their six games, including a 2-1 win at Wembley.

Another evenly-matched A/B clash sees Austria and Serbia do battle. The Austrians, who have improved markedly since Ralf Rangnick took over as coach three years ago, are arguably the more consistent and dynamic of the sides, though Serbia boast more flair. The pair last met in June 2024 in a friendly in Vienna, the home team prevailing 2-1.

Belgium, drawn to face Ukraine, will be hoping for better fortunes under new boss Rudi Garcia, who was handed the reins after Domenico Tedesco paid the price for a most dismal of runs (just two wins in ten). Garcia always talks a good game but can he deliver with the *Diables Rouges*? Most local pundits are sceptical.

Impressive Euro 2024 quarter-finalists Turkey meet the underrated Hungarians in the last of the four A/B eliminators. The two nations crossed paths as recently as 12 months ago, the Magyars narrowly winning 1-0 in a friendly Budapest.

The pick of the B/C play-offs is Slovakia v Slovenia, both of whom were good enough to reach the last 16 of Euro 2024. The Republic of Ireland v Bulgaria match-up should be a close-run affair. When the two last went head-to-head, honours were shared in the 2020-21 Nations League: a 1-1 result in Sofia and a goalless draw in Dublin.

Kosovo's hopes of seeing off Iceland may depend on the form of their brilliant Sparta Prague attackers Albion Rrahmani and Ermal Krasniqi. Armenia, not exactly the watchword in stability – having gone through four head coaches in the last five years – seem ill-equipped to counter the Georgian attacking whirlwind personified by PSG new boy Khvicha Kvaratskhelia.

Play-off...Serbia will be aiming to defend their League A spot v Austria

CONCACAF

JAMES NALTON

Pressure on, Pochettino

Mauricio Pochettino faces his first big test as US head coach with the finals of the 2024-25 CONCACAF Nations League

The nations of North and Central America and the Caribbean continue to prepare for the football bonanza taking place on their shores during the next two summers as the 2024-25 CONCACAF Nations League reaches its finale just as the 2025 Gold Cup begins.

The Nations League finals coincide with the preliminary round of the Gold Cup where 14 more teams bid to qualify for the tournament proper this summer. Seven of those will join the nine that have already secured their spots in what is also a chance for teams to make their mark ahead of these flagship tournaments.

All three 2026 World Cup hosts, Canada, Mexico and the United States, have already qualified for the Gold Cup thanks to their Nations League performances. They now get the chance to add some bonus silverware in the Nations League finals.

This mini-tournament will be the biggest test yet for new United States head coach Mauricio Pochettino. It is his first chance to win a trophy with the team, and the expectation will be that he does so.

On paper, the US will be expected

to get past Panama and reach the final, but Panama have a decent record against their semi-final opponents in recent tournament play. They came out on top in the Copa America group stage match-up between the two in 2024, advancing to the knockout stages at the USA's expense, which ultimately resulted in the firing of then-USMNT head coach Gregg Berhalter. Panama also came out on top in the teams' Gold Cup semi-final meeting in 2023 before losing to Mexico in the final.

The United States have a good record in the Nations League though, winning each of the three editions to date, although they have been helped in that by hosting them all. The 2025 finals will also be played in the United States, with all four matches taking place at the SoFi Stadium in Inglewood, California.

The other semi-final pits the two other 2026 World Cup hosts against each other in a game that could easily pass as the final.

Canada are experiencing something of a revival under former Leeds United and Red Bull Salzburg boss Jesse Marsch, and are getting back to something like their impressive pre-2022 World Cup form. Marsch's side showed in last year's Copa America that they can give anyone a game on their day and progressed further than any of the other CONCACAF guest teams in the CONMEBOL tournament, only narrowly missing out on third place to Uruguay on penalties.

Mexico, meanwhile, are in danger of dropping out of the top 20 of FIFA's rankings for the first time since 2016. In an attempt to halt the decline, they appointed Javier Aguirre as coach last year for what is his third spell in charge of the national team. There is a long-term plan that his assistant, the former Barcelona defender Rafael Marquez, will take over after the World Cup. Canada will certainly not be easy opponents, but the venue in southern California could draw plenty of Mexico fans and offer something resembling home advantage for Aguirre's side.

While these four teams battle for the Nations League trophy, 14 more will be playing for Gold Cup qualification via the prelims. The matches will be played across two legs in late March and the ties have been drawn based on the CONCACAF rankings. They have the potential to produce some one-sided matches but also some upsets as the draw pits the highest-ranked of the 14 teams against the lowest-ranked, the second-highest against the second-lowest, and so on.

Costa Rica, Jamaica, Honduras and Guatemala will all expect to progress. Dwight Yorke, taking charge of his first competitive games as Trinidad & Tobago boss, faces a tough test from Caribbean rivals Cuba, while Suriname against Martinique and Nicaragua versus Guadeloupe could go either way.

Business is about to pick up once again in the CONCACAF region, and these prelim games are a step between the qualification stage and the tournament proper which will run alongside the FIFA Club World Cup this summer.

Meanwhile, World Cup qualification resumes in June, and the Nations League finale offers valuable competitive games for the already-qualified 2026 World Cup hosts – plus a chance at winning some silverware.

Nations League semi-finalists...Canada and Mexico met as recently as September in a friendly in Texas

Host venue...SoFi Stadium, California

Rematch...Panama beat the United States in last summer's Copa America tournament

> This will be the biggest test yet for new United States head coach Mauricio Pochettino. It is his first chance to win a trophy, and the expectation will be that he does so

GOLD CUP PRELIMS DRAW

(14) Belize v Costa Rica (1)
(13) St Vincent & Grenadines v Jamaica (2)
(12) Bermuda v Honduras (3)
(11) Guyana v Guatemala (4)
(10) Cuba v Trinidad & Tobago (5)
(9) Suriname v Martinique (6)
(8) Guadeloupe v Nicaragua (7)

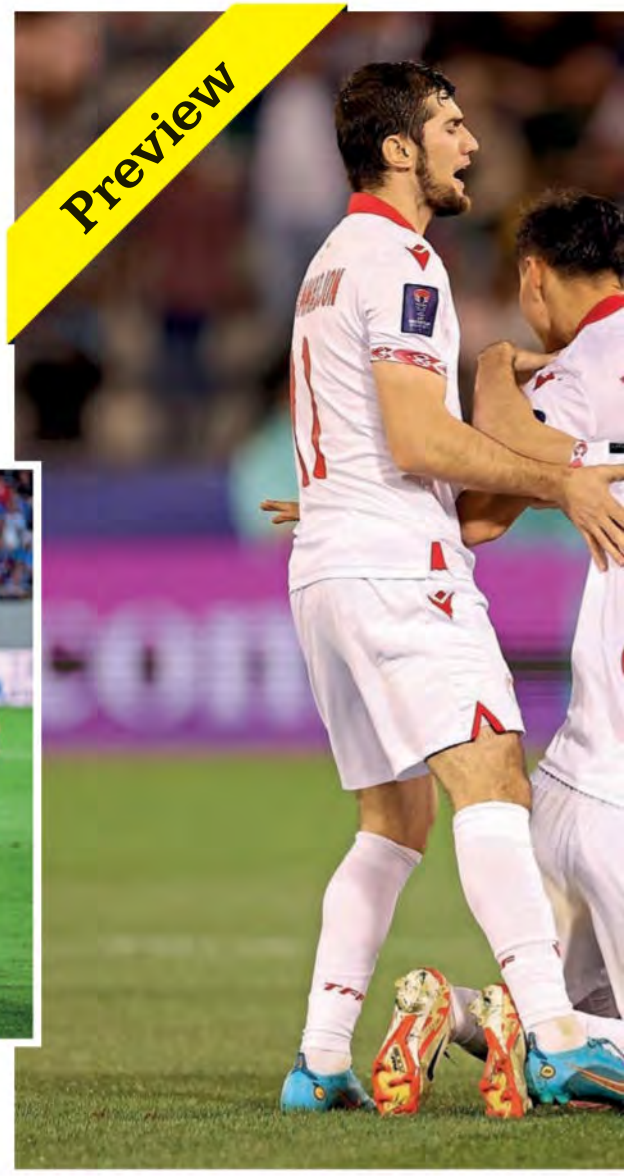
Asia

JOHN DUERDEN

The road to Saudi Arabia

2027 Asian Cup qualifying returns in March with the third round group stage commencing

Overcoming adversity...Syria have remained competitive despite civil war



The 18 teams that reached the third round of qualification for the 2026 World Cup have already been rewarded with a place at the 2027 Asian Cup. That means there are still six places to play for at the 24-team tournament, which will be held in Saudi Arabia. The battle to claim them is going to be fierce and starts on March 25. The format is simple: six groups of four, with the teams that finish first getting the last remaining golden prize.

Group A's Tajikistan were one of the stories of the 2023 Asian Cup (which took place in early 2024), making the quarter-final stage in their first appearance, and will be favourites to return to the tournament. Their biggest obstacle is likely to be the Philippines, seeking to add to their sole appearance in 2019. The Maldives and Timor-Leste are the other hopefuls and while they will be no pushovers at home, it would be a surprise if either can challenge for top spot.

There is a similar situation in Group B with one standout contender, but Lebanon's status as favourites is threatened by the fact that they are not able to play at home due to the security situation in the country. Instead, they will host games in Qatar, where a likely half-empty Grand Hamad Stadium in Doha will make for a far less intimidating atmosphere than Beirut would. There has been a lack of games recently too – something that could also be said for Yemen. No home games, not much in the way of domestic football but still hard to beat. Bhutan and Brunei will be happy just to avoid finishing rock bottom.

Group C should be fascinating. India have made three of the last four Asian Cups but form has been mixed and head coach Manolo Marquez has been following the traditional coaching habit of complaining about how the game is organised in the country. Singapore and Hong Kong are rivals as financial and commercial hubs in Asia and will not make things easy for the others – plus the latter did qualify last time round. Bangladesh have the population but, unfortunatlely, not the pedigree.

There is little doubt as to which team is expected to finish first in Group D.

> Even with all the turmoil in the country, Syria are still a force to be reckoned with in Asia and are the favourites to top their group

When qualification for the World Cup started, most would have expected Thailand to still be active in the hunt for North America, but the War Elephants just missed out. They should be able to take top spot here though in what is not the most challenging group. Their stiffest opposition will be Turkmenistan, who will

Success story... Tajikistan reached the quarter-finals at the last Asian Cup

Group D favourites ...Thailand

be hard to beat, especially in their Central Asian home. It's safe to say that Taiwan (Chinese Taipei) and Sri Lanka will not be heading to Saudi Arabia.

Perhaps the most interesting pot on paper is Group E, although two of the teams will not be able to play at home. Even with all the turmoil in the country, Syria are still a force to be reckoned with in Asia and are the favourites to top their group. Now there is a different regime in charge in Damascus, football seems to have a new lease of life and there is a desire to show this on the international stage. Afghanistan showed in World Cup qualification – when they won in India – that they should not be underestimated, especially as there is a decent amount of European experience in the squad. Myanmar are no pushovers though don't travel well outside of Southeast Asia even if games in Yangon could be tricky. The biggest question is Pakistan. In early February, the federation was banned by FIFA for a third time in less than eight years, this time for refusing amendments to the federation's constitution. They have been given a March 4 deadline to do what is needed to get the ban lifted and get their team on the pitch three weeks later.

Group F has a Southeast Asian feel with Vietnam, Malaysia and Laos. The first two will surely be fighting it out for the top spot. Vietnam will be favourites, fresh after their triumph at the ASEAN Championship in January. Malaysia fell at the first hurdle there but have a new Australian coach in Peter Cklamovski, ex-assistant to Ange Postecoglou. Laos will be happy to take third, though Nepal, 11 places above them in the FIFA rankings, will have something to say about that.

THIRD ROUND GROUP STAGE DRAW

GROUP A
- Tajikistan
- Philippines
- Maldives
- Timor-Leste

GROUP B
- Lebanon
- Yemen
- Bhutan
- Brunei

GROUP C
- India
- Hong Kong
- Singapore
- Bangladesh

GROUP D
- Thailand
- Turkmenistan
- Chinese Taipei
- Sri Lanka

GROUP E
- Syria
- Afghanistan
- Myanmar
- Pakistan

GROUP F
- Vietnam
- Malaysia
- Nepal
- Laos

Brazil

TIM VICKERY

FIFA's new Club World Cup adds uncertainty to Brazilian title race

The Brazilian championship has become increasingly predictable, but a mid-season interruption may make it less so this year

Preview

Holders...reigning Brazilian champions Botafogo will be one of four sides affected by this summer's Club World Cup

As money flows in and financial gaps open up, the Brazilian championship has become more and more imbalanced, but a change to the usual routine could help level the playing field. The league kicks off at the end of March, earlier than usual, and will pause for a month in the middle of June to accommodate the FIFA Club World Cup, where four Brazilian teams are in action.

Three of them are the big hitters, but reigning domestic and continental champions Botafogo are giving cause for concern. It had been expected that they might keep their all-conquering team together until the Club World Cup, but key players have gone, along with coach Artur Jorge – who had yet to be replaced by the end of February, with his assistant Claudio Cacapa in interim charge. Over the last two successful years Botafogo have made a point of starting slowly, pacing themselves by coasting through the local state championship. But owner John Textor may now be distracted by problems at Lyon, one of his other clubs.

But the Flamengo-Palmeiras duo look strong. Now coached by Filipe Luis, Flamengo boast a squad of enviable depth – with the exception of the centre-forward position, where Pedro remains an injury casualty.

Palmeiras have also been looking for a centre-forward in a window that has seen them reinforced with striker Paulinho from Atletico Mineiro and a couple of Uruguayan international midfielders, playmaker Facundo Torres and the more defensive Emiliano Martinez. They still have their formidable Portuguese coach Abel Ferreira, but will lose the irreplaceable talent of Estevao, to Chelsea, after the summer's Club World Cup.

Fluminense are also in the Club World Cup, but they have been on the decline since lifting the Copa Libertadores in late 2023, and nearly went down last year. They could be the next in line to transform themselves into a business, but even with an influx of capital it is hard to see how they can compete for major titles in the short term.

The question for this quartet, then, is how they can balance the Club World Cup with domestic ambitions. The question for the others is how well they can take advantage of a four-week pause. In an over-cluttered calendar, the opportunity to rest and recuperate players should come as a godsend.

Corinthians charged up the table at the end of last year, which would not have been possible if financial fair play restrictions were in place. The club bought their way out of trouble but head coach Ramon Diaz was able to fashion a fascinating, almost retro team, with a strike pair of Memphis Depay and Yuri Alberto backed up by an old-fashioned playmaker in Rodrigo Garro. They can have high hopes, and there will be high expectations from Luis Zubeldia's Sao Paulo, especially now that Oscar has finally returned home after eight successful years in China to add his touches of class.

With Hulk looking sharp, Cuca's Atletico Mineiro are dangerous. Belo Horizonte rivals Cruzeiro have spent big after former great Ronaldo sold the club on to prominent local businessmen. They have brought in some star names, but got off to a poor start in the state championships, and former national team coach Fernando Diniz has already given way to Leonardo Jardim, yet another Portuguese.

Down south, Roger Machado's Internacional may be over-dependent on the form and fitness of playmaker and captain Alan Patrick. Rivals Gremio have appointed Gustavo Quinteros, a coach who has won titles all over South America. It will be fascinating to follow his adaptation to the Brazilian game, though his squad does look a little thin.

There are a record five teams from the north east region – good news for all of them, since it means fewer long trips to away games. Two stand out: Fortaleza, who will hope to continue their remarkable run under Juan Pablo Vojvoda, and Rogerio Ceni's Bahia, who should really be looking to consolidate themselves as a major force now that they are an established part of the City Football Group.

The question for the quartet is how they can balance the Club World Cup with domestic ambitions. The question for the others is how well they can take advantage of a four-week pause

Most of the rest would seem to face a harsh battle against relegation. That would certainly include the likes of Ceara, Sport and Vitoria from the north east, Juventude from the south and Mirassol from upstate Sao Paulo. Red Bull Bragantino saved themselves from the drop at the last in 2024, and their prospects for the year ahead will depend on the priority of their international owners.

As for Vasco da Gama, it is not yet clear who will be owning them, and in turbulent times mid-table respectability and a cup run would be acceptable. And maybe the same applies to Santos, back after a year in the second division and bolstered by the return of the prodigal Neymar. Everyone will want to see the biggest star in the Brazilian game, and there could also be big developments off the field. But a title bid is unlikely. If Neymar could lead the 2025 Santos to league glory it would surely stand among the highlights of his career.

Comeback kids...Oscar could replicate Hulk by starring in Brazil after returning home from a stint in China

BELOW: Centre of attention...Neymar's Santos return will dominate headlines

Asia

JOHN DUERDEN

Chaotic finale overshadows inaugural Elite league stage

Shandong Taishan's final-day withdrawal undermines the Asian Champions League Elite's first season under the new format

The story of the group stage of the AFC Champions League Elite is one dominated by Saudi Arabia and Japan and a final-day controversy that cast a shadow over the east.

The league phase of the continental tournament looked very different this time around where, instead of the ten groups of four, 24 teams were split into two, 12 in the western half of the continent and 12 in the east. Each played eight games (well, not quite, but more on that later), with the top eight going through. In total, there were 96 matches scheduled over five months or so, which meant a lot of work, travel and preparation just to eliminate eight clubs.

It also meant that progression was not that taxing for some. The sight of Uzbekistan's Pakhtakor getting through to the knockout stages despite winning just once and averaging less than a point a game – relegation form in most leagues – was not a great advert for the new format. Al Wasl of the United Arab Emirates also

Held back... the withdrawal of Shandong Taishan (white) cost Korea's Pohang Steelers (red and black)

made it through as did Qatari pair Al Sadd and Al Rayyan, while Esteghlal are flying the flag for Iran.

These all finished below the Saudi Arabian trio, who had enough points to qualify before the stage was halfway done. In the end, Al Hilal, Al Ahli and Al Nassr won 19, drew four and lost just one of their combined 24 matches. It was a dominant display.

Any of those three could go on and win the whole thing, especially as the tournament will be staged in Saudi Arabia from the last eight onwards. Al Hilal finished first and, with four continental championships – more than any other in Asia – have the pedigree. Al Ahli and Al Nassr have come close in the past and would love a first Asian crown. That is especially true of Cristiano Ronaldo, still looking for a first major trophy since arriving in Riyadh. He bagged six goals in the group stage and the other big stars also made their presence felt. For Al Ahli, Riyad Mahrez and Ivan Toney scored five apiece, while Aleksandar Mitrovic did the same for Al Hilal with team-mate Salem Al Dawsari the front-runner with seven strikes overall.

That those three went through was not a surprise. What did raise eyebrows was UAE's Al Ain finishing bottom. The defending champions beat Al Nassr and Al Hilal last year on the way to the title but collected just two points from eight games this time, a dismal run that cost Hernan Crespo his job. In November he was replaced by Leonardo Jardim, the Portuguese boss who led Hilal to the 2021 Asian title, but he only lasted a little over two months.

ABOVE: Best in the west...Al Hilal topped their league thanks to the goals of captain Salem Al Dawsari

Dumped out... holders Al Ain finished bottom

> No reason was given for Shandong Taishan's withdrawal, with reports suggesting that there had been illness throughout the team

Over in the east, Japan ruled the roost with Yokohama F. Marinos, Kawasaki Frontale and Vissel Kobe all progressing. They were joined by Chinese pair Shanghai Port and Shanghai Shenhua, South Korea's Gwangju FC as well as Buriram United of Thailand and Malaysia's Johor Darul Ta'zim. None of these have ever lifted the trophy.

All that was overshadowed, however, by the withdrawal of Chinese outfit Shandong Taishan, just hours before their game at South Korea's Ulsan HD on the final day. No reason was given at the time, with reports suggesting that there had been illness throughout the team.

Unlike other tournaments, the rules here don't state that a team missing one game results in a 3-0 forfeit loss, which may have led to Shandong going through anyway and wouldn't have changed Ulsan's elimination. Instead, all of Shandong's results were voided. The problem is that, under the new format, not all teams play each other so, in the end, some teams ended the stage with seven games while others played the full eight.

This rule hurt Pohang Steelers as the Koreans saw their victory against Shandong erased and fell out of the top eight as a result. The beneficiaries were the two Shanghai clubs, with Port and Shenhua – who both ended up playing a game more than Pohang in the final standings – finishing in the last two qualifying spots to progress to the knockout stages. The AFC has apparently promised to review the rule but, regardless, it wasn't a great way to end the start of this new format. All will be hoping for better to come.

LAST-16 DRAW

WEST

Esteghlal v Al Nassr
Al Wasl v Al Sadd
Pakhtakor v Al Hilal
Al Rayyan v Al Ahli

EAST

Shanghai Port v Yokohama F. Marinos
Shanghai Shenhua v Kawasaki Frontale
Vissel Kobe v Gwangju FC
Buriram United v Johor Darul Ta'zim

Africa

MARK GLEESON

Al Ahly plotting yet another African crown

Egyptian giants are eyeing their sixth consecutive CAF Champions League final as the knockout rounds begin

Record winners... Al Ahly have won the CAF Champions League 12 times

Holders Al Ahly might have again stumbled through the group phase of the African Champions League but the potential path to the final looks comfortably attainable for the Cairo giants, who have drawn Al Hilal of Sudan in the quarter-finals.

While Al Hilal were the first club to secure their berth in the last eight, winning their opening three group games in December and then drawing the fourth to make sure of a top-two place, they have a long history of disappointment when pitted against Egyptian opposition.

It has been a remarkable story of resilience from the exiled Sudanese club, shifted lock, stock and barrel to far-away Mauritania, where they not only play as invited guests in the local league but have also been using Nouakchott as their home ground for Champions League matches.

But even given their exploits in the early stages of the group phase – they lost their last two group games after already securing qualification – Al Hilal will be underdogs against Al Ahly, who are looking to stretch their record number of Champions League triumphs to 13 and reach the final for a sixth

One to watch... Orlando Pirates starlet Relebohile Mofokeng holds off an Al Ahly defender

successive season. They have won four of the last five editions.

Ahly have a long history of starting slowly, looking unconvincing in the group phase but then going on to flex their muscle in the business end of the competition, and that is expected to be the case again as they began 2025 in a purple patch of form. Should they get past Al Hilal, then Ahly would be up against either Esperance of Tunisia or South Africa's Mamelodi Sundowns in the semi-final.

Ahly beat Esperance in last year's final after Esperance had eliminated Sundowns in the semi-finals. The incestuous nature of the Champions League continues this season with Portuguese coach Miguel Cardoso now in charge at Sundowns after Esperance fired him in October. He had been the architect of Esperance's 2-0 aggregate win over the more fancied Sundowns in last year's semi and their advance to the final.

That will be the major narrative of the quarter-final clash between Sundowns and Esperance but there is also the perplexing question around the big match temperament of the big-spending South Africans, who have a history of dominating proceedings in the group stages but then bombing out in the knockout stages.

Al Ahly have a long history of starting slowly, but then going on to flex their muscle in the business end of the competition

Since winning the Champions League in 2016, they have advanced to the last eight of the Champions League every season, save for one, but never made it back to the final.

Cardoso, a journeyman coach previously in charge at Rio Ave, Nantes, Celta Vigo and AEK Athens, has been tasked with breaking the cycle of under achievement and will surely be itching to put one over his old team.

South Africa also have Orlando Pirates in the field after an impressive campaign so far, which included beating Al Ahly away in Cairo in the group phase. The Buccaneers are coached by the cautious Spaniard Jose Riveiro, who is now in his third season at the club. They have a talented squad, with the 20-year-old Relebohile Mofokeng emerging as a potential future star.

Pirates will take on Mouloudia Alger in their quarter-final tie and the winners of that tie will go up against Pyramids of Egypt or Morocco's Royal Armed Forces.

The Moroccan military side, often abbreviated to AS FAR, have changed coaches since finishing top of their group, letting Frenchman Hubert Velud go and replacing him with Portuguese Alexandre Santos, previously at Angolan champions Petro Atletico.

Velud, 65, ruptured his Achilles tendon when celebrating the Rabat-based club's progress in the Champions League after scoring against compatriots Raja Casablanca in January. "Obviously, with the injury, the hospitalisation for surgery, the immobilisation and the rehabilitation, it was not possible for me to be on the field every day. Right after my operation, I was able to manage things remotely, but it is obviously not the same as being with the players every day," said Velud.

The next rounds take place throughout April, starting with the first legs of the quarter-finals on April 1-2 and finishing with the second legs of the semi-finals on April 25-26, before the two-legged final on May 24 and June 1.

CAF Confederation Cup knockout round draw on page 97.

KNOCKOUT ROUND DRAW

QUARTER-FINALS

Al Ahly v Al Hilal
Pyramids v Royal Armed Forces
Mamelodi Sundowns v Esperance
Mouloudia Alger v Orlando Pirates

SEMI-FINALS

Winner QF1 v Winner QF3
Winner QF2 v Winner QF4

Sundowns coach... Miguel Cardoso left Esperance last year

Solomon Islands

STEVE MENARY

Preview

OFC Champions League ready for kick-off

However, the introduction of a new competition in Oceania means the latest edition of OFC's premier club tournament begins amid some uncertainty

The 24th edition of Oceania's top club tournament – and the 19th under the Champions League title – has had a tumultuous run-in that has not helped the standing of a competition that is about to be overshadowed.

The OFC Champions League is usually staged in May but has been brought forward to run from March 30 to April 12. This is because football's world governing body FIFA does not want any other competitions being staged at the same time as its own enlarged Club World Cup being held in the United States.

The OFC's more streamlined event was due to be staged in Fiji, but bringing the dates forward to please FIFA left the hosts without a stadium; rugby union side the Fijian Drua already had the HFC Bank Stadium in Suva booked for those dates. As a result, Fijian representatives Rewa, winners of the country's national league twice in the past three seasons, lost the benefit of home advantage as the competition was shifted to the Solomon Islands.

Rewa were already facing a tough task as Group A features 12-time OFC Champions League winners Auckland City. But if ever there was a chance for another Pacific club to beat New Zealand's perennial winners to the regional title, then this was the year. The Northern League side have been eclipsed in their own backyard by the launch of Auckland FC as a new franchise in Australia's A-League. A number of players, notably All

Holders and favourites...Auckland City's former captain Cam Howieson holds last season's trophy *Credit: OFC Media via Phototek*

Whites attacking midfielder and former captain Cam Howieson, have departed.

New Caledonia are one of only two countries other than New Zealand to have supplied an OFC Champions League winner since 2006. The new format means only one spot per OFC member so there is no space for 2019 winners Hienghene Sport.

Tiga Sport, who were New Caledonia's Super League leaders at the time of its abandonment last year, finished bottom of their group in their last OFC Champions League appearance in 2023 and Pirae, finalists in the competition last year, could have the edge in Group A.

Over in Group B, the switch in venues provides a fillip for the Solomon Islands' representatives, Central Coast. They had been playing in the regional Honiara league until joining the Telekom S-League and took the title last year.

After Papua New Guinea's Hekari United stunned New Zealand's Waitakere United in 2010 – the only other non-Kiwi OFC winner in the last two decades – the club failed to build on that promise and were overshadowed at home. Under coach Erickson Komeng, they have won back-to-back domestic titles and look the likely group winners as long as they can avoid defeat against hosts Central Coast, although Vanuatu's Ifira Black Bird have proved competitive at this level.

The fourth team in Group B is the Cook Islands' Tupapa Maraerenga, who emerged from a preliminary qualifying tournament they also hosted including Samoa's Vaipuna and Royal Puma from American Samoa, but no club entered from Tonga's Major League. An OFC spokesperson explained: "Tonga didn't enter the men's Champions League; I believe due to costs."

Hosts...Central Coast of the Solomon Islands will benefit from home advantage *Credit: Central Coast FC*

While Cam Howieson will definitely not lift the OFC Champions League trophy again, the holders remain firm favourites to win a tournament whose status has not been helped by the shifting of dates, hosts and withdrawals. A further blow has come through the withdrawal of a place for the winners at Gianni Infantino's pet project, the Club World Cup.

> **A further blow has come through the withdrawal of a place for the winners at Gianni Infantino's pet project, the Club World Cup**

"The men's Champions League winners will still get prize money, and it's envisaged there will be an opportunity to play a team from another confederation such as Asia as a further carrot," added the OFC spokesperson.

Instead, the route to FIFA's global club centrepiece will come via the OFC's new Professional League, which is due to launch in 2026 with expressions of interest opened on February 11.

The OFC has held a series of briefings in Auckland, Brisbane, Suva and Papeete with representatives from Tefana, Pirae and Venus all attending the Tahitian workshop. New Zealand's Southern League outfit Christchurch United are keen, while the OFC has also invited interest from clubs outside the confederation, including in Australia and Hawaii.

A minimum of eight clubs and a maximum of ten will be included in the debut competition, with no more than two sides from one country. The OFC wants to be able to recommend teams to its board by July and confirm the participants by September.

All that has the potential to make the last OFC Champions League before the birthing of a bigger rival a rather doleful occasion unless a Pacific island club can cause one final surprise.

2010 champions ...Hekari United *Credit: OFC Media via Phototek*

THE DRAW

GROUP A

- Auckland City
- Pirae
- Tiga Sport
- Rewa

GROUP B

- Ifira Black Bird
- Tupapa Maraerenga
- Hekari United
- Central Coast

Taiwan

JAMES SHIELD

A ground-breaking new home for Taiwanese football

The island's first-ever purpose-built football stadium could be the start of a new era for the sport in Taiwan

In the south-western corner of Taichung, the second largest city in Taiwan, something special is happening which could eventually help soccer supersede baseball as the country's most popular sport.

"We want everyone here to participate in it," local mayor Lu Shiow-yen said, referring to the International Football Sports and Leisure Park (TIFSLP) complex, which is scheduled to be completed in April. "Our aims include to enhance the social atmosphere of the game here, increase participation, cultivate talent and elite-level competitors, and take part in exchanges with teams from abroad which will bring about new ideas."

The project, costing an estimated NT$1.51 billion (around £37 million), will see an 11-a-side artificial pitch, two five-a-side playing areas, an underground car park and associated transport links constructed on the 4.7-hectare site. Most significantly, however, it also involves the creation of a 6,000-seater arena surrounding a naturally turfed surface: the island's first built specifically for football.

In a nation where people are more transfixed by home runs than goals, the official opening ceremony is set to be an historic moment. Maybe a pivotal one too, given what one of the state-of-the-art venue's tenants believes is soccer's potential for growth among her compatriots.

"Having our first proper stadium can make football become a major sport," says Lu Kuei-hua, the head coach of Taichung Blue Whale women's team. "It will also help us to attract more players and possibly international ones too.

"Baseball was always the major sport, but it relies on school teams. If the school doesn't have a team, no one plays. Football is based around private clubs so the potential is vast.

"We didn't start selling tickets until 2019. Before then, we played in front of one or two people. Now 600 to 800 turn up. That shows football can grow, especially with this project."

Lu Kuei-hua is an important figure in Taiwanese soccer. In 2003, she became the first female manager of the women's national team which,

like the men, competes under the banner of Chinese Taipei for political reasons. Now in charge of Taichung Blue Whale, her employers have reached the quarter-finals of this season's AFC Women's Champions League and won five domestic titles.

"The bigger the crowd, the more passion you feel," Liu Chien-yun, the Blue Whale midfielder, admits. "When I first played in the Asian Cup, I'd never experienced anything like those crowds. It made me nervous but it's more enjoyable.

"Football helps me. It gives me purpose, the ups and downs you get, that's like life. It's very valuable."

Mayor Lu, a keen football follower herself, is aware of the positive impact it can have upon all aspects of Taiwanese society. Liu's team-mate, international goalkeeper Tsai Ming-jung, says: "I've given a lot to football but football has given so much to me. It can be really big here."

With Chinese Taipei men's team positioned 165th in the FIFA rankings – sandwiched between Vanuatu and Bermuda – and its women listed 42nd – above the likes of Costa Rica, Haiti, Northern Ireland and Panama – Mayor Lu hopes TIFSLP can help boost Taiwan's performances on the global stage too. Once inaugurated, leading clubs from overseas will be invited to visit and take part in training and information-sharing exercises.

"We aim to make Taichung a base where Taiwan can develop football and hold international competitions," she said. "We'd like to attract foreign teams to train and help strengthen the competitiveness of our own players in the world.

"Teams from southeast Asia, Japan and Europe – club and national – are all invited. Blue Whale are already very successful but we want men's and women's teams to come."

Lu Kuei-hua, who as well as leading Blue Whale is an associate professor of physical education, is excited about the future benefits of TIFSLP.

"There were times, when I was younger, I felt like giving up," she said. "But I wanted to create a legacy and the stadium can be part of that.

"It can help players and coaches improve. When it happens in Taichung, other cities will possibly want to do the same.

"That will build the football population and bring in more money. Then, with more people watching, we can turn players into stars."

> **"Having our first proper stadium can make football become a major sport"**
> Ex-Chinese Taipei Women's national team head coach Lu Kuei-hua

Ambitious...the Taiwan women's national team

ABOVE & BELOW: The International Football Sports and Leisure Park...projections of how the ground-breaking stadium in Taichung will look upon completion

Samoa

STEVE MENARY

'This is only the beginning'

Thanks to artificial intelligence and an ambitious coach, Samoa's women have an exciting future – starting with this year's Under-17 World Cup

Qualified...Samoa's Under-16s women celebrate reaching the U17 World Cup

Samoa's surprise appearance at this year's Under-17 Women's World Cup in Morocco will be the first time that a side from the Pacific island, with a population of just 225,000, has ever appeared in a global tournament.

Their appearance benefitted from FIFA's decision to expand the tournament from 16 to 24 teams for this year, which gave the Oceania Football Confederation two slots. But the team's hopes were also boosted by an incredible digital global trawl for players.

The Samoa side was bolstered by a number of players from the island's diaspora, who were identified by the UK-based International Football Consultancy (IFC) ran by Russell Gurr and Alastair McLae. The duo use artificial intelligence to identify players with qualifying ancestry and began looking for eligible potential players after being brought on board by Jess Ibrom, the head coach of Samoa's men's senior side, during his previous role as the national technical director.

> "In just under three years, we identified more than 120 eligible female players for Samoa, including ten members who were key to the U16 team"
>
> Russell Gurr, International Football Consultancy

Gurr explains: "In 2021, we developed and implemented a long-term overseas talent identification strategy designed to identify players for all squads, both male and female, from Under-16 to senior levels.

"Within the women's teams, we achieved early success, with the senior squad ranking among the highest climbers in the 2022 World Rankings – with 90 per cent of players in that squad having been identified by us. In just under three years, we identified more than 120 eligible female players for Samoa, including ten members who were key to the U16 team."

On top of the ten, there were another 12 players identified by the U16 head coach Juan Chang Urrea and the federation. "The players identified by IFC were really important, but it's not just about identifying the players. It's then about building relationships with those players and their parents," Chang Urrea explains.

The U16 squad that Samoa sent to the qualifiers in Fiji included 12 players from the United States, four from Australia and two each from New Zealand and Samoa, and the impact was immediate.

Samoa emerged from a group containing the hosts, Tonga and the Cook Islands without conceding a goal, and then beat New Caledonia in the semi-final 2-0 with early goals from Holly Leapai – one of IFC's players – and Kealia Nansen.

Despite losing 4-0 to New Zealand in the final, the semi-final victory was enough for Samoa to qualify for a debut World Cup.

The success was a surprise but not unexpected for Chang Urrea, who was born in Germany, educated in the USA and played junior international football for Guatemala, and had been working in the Pacific for a decade prior to taking the Samoa job in 2023.

He says: "Qualifying for a World Cup is something you always have as a goal. Yes, I think we always had that as a realistic goal because of the strategy that we had at the federation, but we did not know that it would come this soon.

"The impact this had in Samoa is massive, particularly on the senior teams and has also had positive effects in the US, Australia and New Zealand as it opens the door for any girls that want to represent Samoa at any level. This is only the beginning."

Triumphant... Samoa U16s coach Juan Chang Urrea

Tales from the 211

Exploring the weird and wonderful world of football across FIFA's 211 member nations – and beyond

Journeyman keeper ...Krul in training for Cambuur back at the start of his career

ANDRE KRUL TICKS OFF FINAL CONTINENT

Dutch goalkeeper Andre Krul has become only the second-ever footballer to play professionally on six geographic continents after appearing for AJEL de Rufisque in Senegal.

After spells at several different Dutch clubs, the 37-year-old headed to Colombia (South America), Puerto Rico (North America), Japan (Asia) and Australia (part of Asia in football terms but part of Oceania geographically), before the move to Africa last autumn. However, he had to wait before making his debut earlier this year in the Senegalese Cup – a competition that has recently gained a reputation for producing unusual headlines, most notably last season when the final was contested by teams from the third and fifth tiers.

It has been an eye-opening move for Krul, who has been electrified by plug sockets and discovered a dead chicken behind his goal in training. But that pales in comparison to the trials and tribulations of the first player to tick off every continent – and still the only player to feature in six different football continental confederations. Legendary German shot-stopper Lutz Pfannenstiel was falsely jailed for match fixing for 101 days in Singapore, pronounced dead three times on the pitch after a collision in England and told he could face deportation from New Zealand for kidnapping a penguin and keeping it in his bathtub.

ROMANIAN DUO JOIN REALITY TV RACE

Dan Alexa, the coach of Romanian third-tier team CS Tunari, has temporarily left his job to take part in *Asia Express* – a reality TV show in which the participants race across Vietnam, the Philippines and South Korea in pairs on a shoestring budget. He will partner for the adventure with Gabriel Tamas, the sporting director of second-tier Concordia Chiajna, who hung up his boots in 2023 and enjoyed spells at Galatasaray, Spartak Moscow, Celta Vigo, Auxerre, West Brom, Doncaster, Watford, Hapoel Haifa and a whole host of Romanian clubs in a nomadic career.

But what does Alexa's absence mean for Tunari, who top their regional pool after racking up 14 successive wins before the winter break? The head coach will be temporarily replaced in the dugout by his assistant Stefan Grigorie and has told his players that he will be back soon. However, if he and Tamas make it to the end of the 4,000km-long race, he is likely to be gone for longer and Tunari's six-point lead at the time of writing could be whittled down, potentially endangering their promotion ambitions.

POLISH TEAM ROBBED AT TRAINING CAMP

Bruk-Bet Termalica Nieciecza, who are chasing promotion from the Polish second division, fell victim to an unusual crime during a mid-season training camp in Turkey. A drunk German tourist stole 17 football boots that had been left outside the team's hotel rooms – he reportedly got spooked and so did not complete the theft of the ninth pair – leaving the players weighing up whether to buy replacement footwear. But the hotel used their CCTV cameras to identify the perpetrator, who was forced to return the boots the next day and pay a fine.

Incidentally, if Bruk-Bet do manage to go up this summer, they will be one of the smallest village clubs in top-flight European football. The southern Polish village of Nieciecza has only 750 inhabitants – the local population would fit into their stadium more than six times over – and was reported to be the smallest settlement to ever be represented in a top-flight European league when Bruk-Bet first reached the Ekstraklasa in 2015. But in fact, there are numerous smaller places whose teams have played in the top tier domestically. The tiniest is the home village of Northern Irish Premiership side Loughgall, which has only 282 residents.

Lee Wingate

COMING UP...

FC Suduroy v TB Tvoroyri
Faroe Islands Premier League, April 5
Suduroy and Tvoroyri, from the Faroes' southernmost island, are set to meet in one of Europe's most remote top-flight derbies. The teams briefly played under the same umbrella for two seasons but have been independent since 2019.

Monza v Como
Serie A, April 6
Como angered supporters of their rivals when they placed adverts for their new shirts on buses in the city centre of Monza late last year – an act described by local media as a declaration of war. A spicy atmosphere is expected.

Newcastle Jets v Central Coast Mariners, A-League, April 12
The "F3 Derby" sees the team with the best head-to-head record over their three annual matches awarded a bizarre trophy made of concrete from the motorway that connects the two cities. Having won 2-1 and drawn 2-2 earlier this season, the Mariners are in the "driving" seat.

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Club Football

EUROPE

2024-25 UEFA CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Knockout Round Play-Offs – 1st Leg

Feb 11 – Guingamp
Brest (Fra) 0
PSG (Fra) 3 (Vitinha 21 pen, Dembele 45, 66)

Feb 11 – Manchester
Manchester City (Eng) 2 (Haaland 19, 80 pen)
Real Madrid (Spa) 3 (Mbappe 60, Brahim 86, Bellingham 90+2)

Feb 11 – Turin
Juventus (Ita) 2 (McKennie 34, Mbangula 82)
PSV (Ned) 1 (Perisic 56)

Feb 11 – Lisbon
Sporting (Por) 0
Borussia Dortmund (Ger) 3 (Guirassy 60, Gross 68, Adeyemi 82)

Feb 12 – Brugge
Club Brugge (Bel) 2 (Jutgla 15, Nilsson 90+4 pen)
Atalanta (Ita) 1 (Pasalic 41)

Feb 12 – Rotterdam
Feyenoord (Ned) 1 (Paixao 3)
Milan (Ita) 0

Feb 12 – Glasgow
Celtic (Sco) 1 (Maeda 79)
Bayern Munich (Ger) 2 (Olise 45, Kane 49)

Feb 12 – Monaco
Monaco (Fra) 0
Benfica (Por) 1 (Pavlidis 48)

Knockout Round Play-Offs – 2nd Leg

Feb 18 – Bergamo
Atalanta (Ita) 1 (Lookman 46)
Club Brugge (Bel) 3 (Talbi 3, 27, Jutgla 45+3)
Club Brugge win 5-2 on aggregate

Feb 18 – Milan
Milan (Ita) 1 (Gimenez 1)
Feyenoord (Ned) 1 (Carranza 73)
Feyenoord win 2-1 on aggregate

Feb 18 – Munich
Bayern Munich (Ger) 1 (Davies 90+4)
Celtic (Sco) 1 (Kuhn 63)
Bayern Munich win 3-2 on aggregate

Feb 18 – Lisbon
Benfica (Por) 3 (Akturkoglu 22, Pavlidis 76 pen, Kokcu 84)
Monaco (Fra) 3 (Minamino 32, Ben Seghir 51, Ilenikhena 81)
Benfica win 4-3 on aggregate

Feb 19 – Paris
PSG (Fra) 7 (Barcola 20, Kvaratskhelia 39, Vitinha 59, Doue 64, Mendes 69, Ramos 76, Mayulu 86)
Brest (Fra) 0
PSG win 10-0 on aggregate

Feb 19 – Madrid
Real Madrid (Spa) 3 (Mbappe 4, 33, 61)
Manchester City (Eng) 1 (Nico 90+2)
Real Madrid win 6-3 on aggregate

Feb 19 – Eindhoven
PSV (Ned) 3 (Perisic 53, Saibari 74, Flamingo 98)
Juventus (Ita) 1 (Weah 63)
After Extra-Time. PSV win 4-3 on aggregate

Feb 19 – Dortmund
Borussia Dortmund (Ger) 0
Sporting (Por) 0
Borussia Dortmund win 3-0 on aggregate

Round of 16 Draw

PSV (Ned) v Arsenal (Eng); Real Madrid (Spa) v Atletico Madrid (Spa); PSG (Fra) v Liverpool (Eng); Club Brugge (Bel) v Aston Villa (Eng); Benfica (Por) v Barcelona (Spa); B. Dortmund (Ger) v Lille (Fra); Bayern Munich (Ger) v Bayer Leverkusen (Ger); Feyenoord (Ned) v Inter (Ita)
First legs took place on March 4-5, second legs took place on March 11-12

2024-25 EUROPA LEAGUE

Knockout Round Play-Offs – 1st Leg

Feb 13 – Budapest
Ferencvaros (Hun) 1 (Abu Fani 23)
Viktoria Plzen (Cze) 0

Feb 13 – Enschede
Twente (Ned) 2 (Ltaief 5, Van Wolfswinkel 90+5 pen)
Bodo/Glimt (Nor) 1 (Berg 85)

Feb 13 – Brussels
Union Saint-Gilloise (Bel) 0
Ajax (Ned) 2 (Rasmussen 59, Mokio 71)

Feb 13 – Alkmaar
AZ (Ned) 4 (Mijnans 12, Parrott 37 pen, Clasie 57, Wolfe 66)
Galatasaray (Tur) 1 (Sallai 20)

Feb 13 – Herning
Midtjylland (Den) 1 (Buksa 38)
Real Sociedad (Spa) 2 (Mendez 11 pen, Kubo 31)

Feb 13 – Thessaloniki
PAOK (Gre) 1 (Samatta 21)
FCSB (Rou) 2 (Gheorghita 50, Dawa 60)

Feb 13 – Istanbul
Fenerbahce (Tur) 3 (Tadic 11, Dzeko 42, En-Nesyri 57)
Anderlecht (Bel) 0

Feb 13 – Porto
Porto (Por) 1 (Moua 67)
Roma (Ita) 1 (Celik 45+5)

Knockout Round Play-Offs – 2nd Leg

Feb 20 – Plzen
Viktoria Plzen (Cze) 3 (Jemelka 27, Sulc 35, Durosinmi 38)
Ferencvaros (Hun) 0
Viktoria Plzen win 3-1 on aggregate

Feb 20 – Bodo
Bodo/Glimt (Nor) 5 (Hogh 56 pen, Hilgers 90+2 og, Wembangomo 90+4, Fet 111, Verschueren 114 og)
Twente (Ned) 2 (Sjovold 26 og, Steijn 90+6)
After Extra-Time. Bodo/Glimt win 6-4 on aggregate

Feb 20 – Amsterdam
Ajax (Ned) 1 (Taylor 93 pen)
Union SG (Bel) 2 (Mac Allister 16, David 28 pen)
After Extra-Time. Ajax win 3-2 on aggregate

Feb 20 – Istanbul
Galatasaray (Tur) 2 (Osimhen 56, Sallai 70)
AZ (Ned) 2 (Maikuma 42, Kasius 55)
AZ win 6-3 on aggregate

Feb 20 – San Sebastian
Real Sociedad (Spa) 5 (Mendez 5, Sucic 18, 45+2, Oyarzabal 73 pen, Oskarsson 90)
Midtjylland (Den) 2 (Buksa 24 pen, Osorio 38)
Real Socieded win 7-3 on aggregate

Feb 20 – Bucharest
FCSB (Rou) 2 (Cisotti 30, Miculescu 81)
PAOK (Gre) 0
FCSB win 4-1 on aggregate

Feb 20 – Brussels
Anderlecht (Bel) 2 (Vazquez 19, 55)
Fenerbahce (Tur) 2 (En-Nesyri 4, Akcicek 63)
Fenerbahce win 5-2 on aggregate

Feb 20 – Rome
Roma (Ita) 3 (Dybala 35, 39, Pisilli 83)
Porto (Por) 2 (Aghehowa 27, Rensch 90+6 og)
Roma win 4-3 on aggregate

Round of 16 Draw

AZ (Ned) v Tottenham (Eng); Ajax (Ned) v Eintracht Frankfurt (Ger); Bodo/Glimt (Nor) v Olympiakos (Gre); Viktoria Plzen (Cze) v Lazio (Ita); Fenerbahce (Tur) v Rangers (Sco); Roma (Ita) v Athletic Club (Spa); FCSB (Rou) v Lyon (Fra); Real Sociedad (Spa) v Manchester United (Eng)
First legs took place on March 6, second legs took place on March 13

2024-25 CONFERENCE LEAGUE

Knockout Round Play-Offs – 1st Leg

Feb 13 – Celje
Celje (Svn) 2 (Kucys 2, 59)
APOEL (Cyp) 2 (Abagna 32, Laifis 70)

Feb 13 – Banja Luka
Borac Banja Luka (Bih) 1 (Ogrinec 90+1)
Olimpija Ljubljana (Svn) 0

Feb 13 – Nicosia
Omonia (Cyp) 1 (Semedo 51 pen)
Pafos (Cyp) 1 (Orsic 84)

Feb 13 – Molde
Molde (Nor) 0
Shamrock Rovers (Irl) 1 (M. Noonan 57)

Feb 13 – Helsinki
Vikingur Reykjavik (Isl) 2 (Atlason 13, Vilhjalmsson 56)
Panathinaikos (Gre) 1 (Ioannidis 90+1 pen)

Feb 13 – Backa Topola
TSC (Srb) 1 (Mboungou 28)
Jagiellonia Bialystok (Pol) 3 (Imaz 31, 89, Pululu 81)

Feb 13 – Gent
Gent (Bel) 0
Real Betis (Spa) 3 (Antony 47, Bakambu 72, Altimira 84)

Feb 13 – Copenhagen
Copenhagen (Den) 1 (Larsson 45+1)
Heidenheim (Ger) 2 (Keller 59, Siersleben 85)

Knockout Round Play-Offs – 2nd Leg

Feb 20 – Seville
Real Betis (Spa) 0
Gent (Bel) 1 (Brown 87)
Real Betis win 3-1 on aggregate

Feb 20 – Bialystok
Jagiellonia Bialystok (Pol) 3 (Hansen 8, Imaz 70, Radojevic 76 og)
TSC (Srb) 1 (Lazetic 17)
Jagiellonia Bialystok win 6-2 on aggregate

Feb 20 – Nicosia
APOEL (Cyp) 0
Celje (Svn) 2 (Kucys 45+4, Svetlin 51)
Celje win 4-2 on aggregate

Feb 20 – Athens
Panathinaikos (Gre) 2 (Mladenovic 70, Tete 90+5)
Vikingur Reykjavik (Isl) 0
Panathinaikos win 3-2 on aggregate

Feb 20 – Ljubljana
Olimpija Ljubljana (Svn) 0
Borac Banja Luka (Bih) 0
Borac Banja Luka win 1-0 on aggregate

Feb 20 – Limassol
Pafos (Cyp) 2 (Bruno 28, Silva 65)
Omonia (Cyp) 1 (Jovetic 60)
Pafos win 3-2 on aggregate

Feb 20 – Dublin
Shamrock Rovers (Irl) 0
Molde (Nor) 1 (Eikrem 10)
After Extra-Time. 1-1 on aggregate
Molde win 5-4 on pens

Feb 20 – Heidenheim
Heidenheim (Ger) 1 (Scienza 74)
Copenhagen (Den) 3 (Chiakha 37, Diks 53 pen, Huescas 114)
After Extra-Time. Copenhagen win 4-3 on aggregate

Round of 16 Draw

Real Betis (Spa) v Vitoria Guimaraes (Por); Jagiellonia Bialystok (Pol) v Cercle Brugge (Bel); Celje (Svn) v Lugano (Swi); Panathinaikos (Gre) v Fiorentina (Ita); Copenhagen (Den) v Chelsea (Eng); Molde (Nor) v Legia Warsaw (Pol); Pafos (Cyp) v Djurgarden (Swe); Borac Banja Luka (Bih) v Rapid Vienna (Aut)
First legs took place on March 6, second legs took place on March 13

SOUTH AMERICA

2025 COPA LIBERTADORES

First Stage – 1st Leg

Feb 4 – Maturin
Monagas (Ven) 2 (T. Rodriguez 78, Manrique 90)
Defensor Sporting (Uru) 0

Feb 5 – Asuncion
Nacional (Par) 1 (Caballero 7)
Alianza Lima (Per) 1 (Barcos 90+9 pen)

Feb 6 – Santa Cruz de la Sierra
Blooming (Bol) 3 (Garzon 16, Villarroel 21, Alaniz 37)
El Nacional (Ecu) 2 (Guisamano 27, Ledesma 87)

First Stage – 2nd Leg

Feb 11 – Montevideo
Defensor Sporting (Uru) 0
Monagas (Ven) 2 (T. Rodriguez 34, Romero 61)
Monagas win 4-0 on aggregate

Feb 12 – Lima
Alianza Lima (Per) 3 (Quevedo 11, 55, Barcos 50)
Nacional (Par) 1 (Gaona 15)
Alianza Lima win 4-2 on aggregate

Feb 13 – Quito
El Nacional (Ecu) 2 (Martinez 67, Guisamano 75)
Blooming (Bol) 1 (Spenhay 19)
4-4 on aggregate. El Nacional win 4-3 on pens

Second Stage – 1st Leg

Feb 18 – Iquique
Deportes Iquique (Chi) 2 (Puch 35, 70 pen)
Santa Fe (Col) 1 (Rodallega 2)

Feb 18 – La Paz
The Strongest (Bol) 1 (Guerrero 38)
Bahia (Bra) 1 (Willian Jose 69)

Feb 18 – Lima
Alianza Lima (Per) 1 (Ceppelini 4)
Boca Juniors (Arg) 0

Feb 19 – Quito
El Nacional (Ecu) 0
Barcelona SC (Ecu) 1 (Velez 78 og)

Feb 19 – Caracas
Universidad Central (Ven) 1 (Joao Pedro 75 og)
Corinthians (Bra) 1 (Carrillo 36)

Feb 19 – Montevideo
Boston River (Uru) 1 (Gutierrez 77 pen)
Nublense (Chi) 0

Feb 20 – Maturin
Monagas (Ven) 0
Cerro Porteno (Par) 4 (Da Costa 14, Benitez 33, Dominguez 45+3, Viera 63)

Feb 20 – Ibague
Tolima (Col) 0
Melgar (Per) 1 (Cabrera 36)

Second Stage – 2nd Leg

Feb 25 – Bogota
Santa Fe (Col) 2 (Murillo 14, Mafla 90+7)
Deportes Iquique (Chi) 1 (Pino 6)
3-3 on aggregate. Deportes Iquique win 2-1 on pens

Feb 25 – Salvador
Bahia (Bra) 3 (Rodriguez 41 pen, Ademir 48, 63)
The Strongest (Bol) 0
Bahia win 4-1 on aggregate

Feb 25 – Buenos Aires
Boca Juniors (Arg) 2 (Trauco 5 og, Zenon 58)
Alianza Lima (Per) 1 (Barcos 19)
2-2 on aggregate. Alianza Lima win 5-4 on pens

Feb 26 – Guayaquil
Barcelona SC (Ecu) 1 (Rivero 68)
El Nacional (Ecu) 1 (Ledesma 45+9 pen)
Barcelona SC win 2-1 on aggregate

Feb 26 – Sao Paulo
Corinthians (Bra) 3 (Yuri Alberto 3, 89, Matheus Bidu 40)
Universidad Central (Ven) 2 (Cuesta 6, A. Martinez 45+1)
Corinthians win 4-3 on aggregate

Feb 26 – Chillan
Nublense (Chi) 1 (M. Rodriguez 9)
Boston River (Uru) 1 (Anello 85)
Boston River win 2-1 on aggregate

Feb 27 – Asuncion
Cerro Porteno (Par) 3 (Leon 19, Morel 45+4, Viera 51)
Monagas (Ven) 1 (Rodriguez 4)
Cerro Porteno win 7-1 on aggregate

Feb 27 – Lima
Melgar (Per) 1 (Bordacahar 86 pen)
Tolima (Col) 0
Melgar win 2-0 on aggregate

2025 RECOPA SUDAMERICANA

First Leg

Feb 20 – Avellaneda
Racing (Arg) 2 (Vietto 31 pen, Martinez 63)
Botafogo (Bra) 0

Second Leg

Feb 27 – Rio de Janeiro
Botafogo (Bra) 0
Racing (Arg) 2 (Zaracho 50, Zuculini 69)
Racing win 4-0 on aggregate

2025 BRAZILIAN SUPER CUP

Feb 2 – Belem
Botafogo 1 (Patrick 87)
Flamengo 3 (Bruno Henrique 13 pen, 20, Luiz Araujo 83)

ASIA

2024-25 CHAMPIONS LEAGUE ELITE

West Region

Matchday 7

Feb 3 – Al Ain
Al Ain (UAE) 1 (Kaku 42)
Al Rayyan (Qat) 2 (Trezeguet 50, Guedes 75)

Feb 3 – Tehran
Esteghlal (Irn) 1 (Kojo 4)
Al Shorta (Irq) 1 (Amin 49)

Feb 3 – Al Rayyan
Al Sadd (Qat) 1 (Afif 1)
Al Ahli (KSA) 3 (Firmino 10, Ibanez 39, Mahrez 81)

Feb 3 – Riyadh
Al Nassr (KSA) 4 (Al Hassan 25, Ronaldo 44 pen, 78, Al Fatil 88)
Al Wasl (UAE) 0

Feb 4 – Al Rayyan
Al Gharafa (Qat) 1 (Sassi 40)
Pakhtakor (Uzb) 0

Feb 4 – Riyadh
Al Hilal (KSA) 4 (Malcom 10, Cancelo 25, S. Al Dawsari 38, 45+1)
Persepolis (Irn) 1 (Gvelesiani 90 pen)

Matchday 8

Feb 17 – Tashkent
Pakhtakor (Uzb) 2 (Riascos 18, 56)
Al Sadd (Qat) 1 (Al Haydos 37 pen)

Feb 17 – Baghdad
Al Shorta (Irq) 2 (Al Mawas 50, Lucas 90+4)
Al Ain (UAE) 0

Feb 17 – Tehran
Persepolis (Irn) 0
Al Nassr (KSA) 0

Feb 17 – Jeddah
Al Ahli (KSA) 4 (Toney 21, Firmino 34, Galeno 44, Mahrez 59 pen)
Al Gharafa (Qat) 2 (Joselu 6 pen, Brahimi 80 pen)

Feb 18 – Al Rayyan
Al Rayyan (Qat) 0
Esteghlal (Irn) 2 (Azadi 46, Koushki 69)

Feb 18 – Dubai
Al Wasl (UAE) 0
Al Hilal (KSA) 2 (Marcos Leonardo 13, S. Al Dawsari 49)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Hilal*	8	7	1	0	24	7	22
Al Ahli*	8	7	1	0	23	8	22
Al Nassr*	8	5	2	1	17	6	17
Al Sadd*	8	3	3	2	10	9	12
Al Wasl*	8	3	2	3	8	12	11
Esteghlal*	8	2	3	3	8	9	9
Al Rayyan*	8	2	2	4	8	12	8
Pakhtakor*	8	1	4	3	4	6	7
Persepolis	8	1	4	3	6	10	7
Al Gharafa	8	2	1	5	10	18	7
Al Shorta	8	1	3	4	7	17	6
Al Ain	8	0	2	6	11	22	2

Advance to the last 16

East Region

Matchday 7

Feb 11 – Gosford
Central Coast Mariners (Aus) 1 (Kuol 70)
Johor Darul Ta'zim (Mas) 2 (Alvaro 64, 79)

Feb 11 – Kobe
Vissel Kobe (Jpn) 4 (Muto 11, Kuwasaki 54, Yuruki 56, Osako 81)
Shanghai Port (Chn) 0

Feb 11 – Pohang
Pohang Steelers (Kor) 0
Kawasaki Frontale (Jpn) 4 (Yamada 38, Wakizaka 71, Kawahara 74, Erison 88)

Feb 12 – Yokohama
Yokohama F. Marinos (Jpn) 1 (Yan Matheus 20)
Shanghai Shenhua (Chn) 0

Feb 12 – Buriram
Buriram Utd (Tha) 2 (Bissoli 20, Mueanta 90+3)
Ulsan HD (Kor) 1 (Jang Si-young 45+1)

Matchday 8

Feb 18 – Gwangju
Gwangju (Kor) 2 (Oh Hu-seong 68, 74)
Buriram United (Tha) 2 (Bissoli 13, Boakye 35)

Feb 18 – Kawasaki
Kawasaki Frontale (Jpn) 2 (Erison 36 pen, Marcinho 90+8)
Central Coast Mariners (Aus) 0

Feb 18 – Shanghai
Shanghai Shenhua (Chn) 4 (Saulo 2, 48, 70 pen, Chan 45+3)
Vissel Kobe (Jpn) 2 (Tominaga 87, Ide 90+3)

Feb 18 – Johor Bahru
J. Darul Ta'zim (Mas) 5 (Arribas 37, Bergson 52, Arif 56, Jese 90+7, Obregon 90+15 pen)
Pohang Steelers (Kor) 2 (Lee Ho-jae 27, Kang Hyeon-je 80)

Feb 19 – Shanghai
Shanghai Port (Chn) 0
Yokohama F. Marinos (Jpn) 2 (Uenaka 64, Amano 69)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Yokohama F. Marinos*	7	6	0	1	21	7	18
Kawasaki Frontale*	7	5	0	2	13	4	15
Johor Darul Ta'zim*	7	4	2	1	16	8	14
Gwangju*	7	4	2	1	15	9	14
Vissel Kobe*	7	4	1	2	14	9	13
Buriram United*	8	3	3	2	7	12	12
Shanghai Shenhua*	8	3	1	4	13	12	10
Shanghai Port*	8	2	2	4	10	18	8
Pohang Steelers	7	2	0	5	9	17	6
Ulsan HD	7	1	0	6	4	16	3
Central Coast Mariners	7	0	1	6	8	18	1
Shandong Taishan**	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

*Advance to the last 16 **Considered withdrawn*

2024-25 CHAMPIONS LEAGUE TWO

Last 16 – West Region

Feb 11-12:
Al Hussein (Jor) 0-1 Sharjah (UAE);
Al Khaldiya (Bhr) 1-2 Tractor (Irn);
Al Wehdat (Jor) 0-2 Shabab Al Ahli (UAE);
Al Wakrah (Qat) 2-2 Al Taawoun (KSA)
Feb 18-19:
Sharjah (UAE) 0-1 Al Hussein (Jor) (agg 1-1, *AET, Sharjah win 3-0 on pens*); Tractor (Irn) 3-3 Al Khaldiya (Bhr) (agg 5-4); Shabab Al Ahli (UAE) 4-3 Al Wehdat (Jor) (agg 6-3); Al Taawoun (KSA) 2-2 Al Wakrah (Qat) (agg 4-4, *AET, Al Taawoun win 4-3 on pens*)

Last 16 –East Region

Feb 12-13:
Nam Dinh (Vie) 0-3 Sanfrecce Hiroshima (Jpn); Sydney FC (Aus) 2-2 Bangkok United (Tha); Port (Tha) 0-4 Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors (Kor); Muangthong Utd (Tha) 2-3 Lion City Sailors (Sgp)
Feb 19-20:
Sanfrecce Hiroshima (Jpn) 4-0 Nam Dinh (Vie) (agg 7-0); Bangkok United (Tha) 2-3 Sydney FC (Aus) (agg 4-5, *AET*); Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors (Kor) 1-0 Port (Tha) (agg 5-0); Lion City Sailors (Sgp) 4-0 Muangthong United (Tha) (agg 7-3)

2025 JAPANESE SUPER CUP

Feb 8 – Tokyo
Vissel Kobe 0
Sanfrecce Hiroshima 2 (Arslan 12, Araki 70)

AFGHANISTAN

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Abu Muslim (C)	10	9	1	0	29	4	28
Attack Energy	10	9	1	0	25	3	28
Sorkh Poshan Khafi	10	8	0	2	25	10	24
Istiqlal Club	10	4	1	5	9	22	13
Sarrafan	10	3	3	4	8	10	12
Khurasan	10	3	3	4	11	18	12
Sarsabz Yashlar	10	3	2	5	13	13	11
Mawj Sahel Sehat	10	3	0	7	8	15	9
Aino	10	2	2	6	7	14	8
Jawanan Perozi	10	2	2	6	9	21	8
Adalat Farah (R)	10	0	3	7	10	24	3
Khadim (R)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

BRUNEI

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Kasuka (C)	13	12	1	0	93	8	37
DPMM II	13	12	0	1	62	10	36
Indera	13	10	2	1	63	8	32
Kota Ranger	13	9	0	4	36	24	27
MS PPDB	13	8	1	4	31	17	25
MS ABDB	13	7	3	3	36	11	24
Wijaya	13	6	1	6	32	38	19
Rimba Star	13	5	1	7	23	46	16
AKSE Bersatu	13	4	2	7	29	36	14
Kuala Belait	13	3	1	9	20	36	10
Jerudong	13	3	1	9	11	53	10
Panchor Murai	13	3	1	9	11	55	10
BSRC	13	2	0	11	17	48	6
Lun Bawang	13	0	0	13	6	80	0

CONCACAF

2025 CONCACAF CHAMPIONS CUP

First Round – 1st Leg

Feb 4 – Santiago de los Caballeros
Real Hope (Hai) 0
Cruz Azul (Mex) 2 (Sepulveda 38, Guillaume 84 og)

Feb 5 – Hamilton
Forge FC (Can) 0
Monterrey (Mex) 2 (Deossa 53, Cortizo 66)

Feb 5 – Esteli
Real Esteli (Nca) 1 (Grahl 83)
Tigres UANL (Mex) 0

Feb 6 – Langford
Cavalry (Can) 2 (Trafford 57, Warschewski 80)
Pumas UNAM (Mex) 1 (Lopez 44)

Feb 6 – Santiago de los Caballeros
Cibao (Dom) 1 (Diaz 1)
Guadalajara (Mex) 1 (Mejia 90+10)

Feb 18 – Colorado
Colorado Rapids (USA) 2 (Mihailovic 48 pen, 80)
LAFC (USA) 1 (Long 87)

Feb 19 – Kansas City
Sporting Kansas City (USA) 0
Inter Miami (USA) 1 (Messi 56)

Feb 19 – Antigua
Antigua GFC (Gua) 1 (Santis 24)
Seattle Sounders (USA) 3 (Arriola 3, De la Vega 61, Rusnak 90+5)

Feb 19 – Tegucigalpa
Motagua (Hon) 1 (Auzmendi 41)
FC Cincinnati (USA) 4 (Bucha 28, 78, Denkey 49, Evander 87)

Feb 19 – San Jose
Herediano (Crc) 0
Real Salt Lake (USA) 0

Feb 20 – San Juan
Saprissa (Crc) 2 (Torres 52, Rodriguez 90+5)
Vancouver Whitecaps (Can) 1 (Gauld 21)

First Round – 2nd Leg

Feb 11 – Mexico City
Cruz Azul (Mex) 5 (Sepulveda 21, 24, Fernandez 26, 75, Montano 60)
Real Hope (Hai) 0
Cruz Azul win 7-0 on aggregate

Feb 11 – Guadalupe
Monterrey (Mex) 3 (Berterame 19, 58, Cortizo 48)
Forge FC (Can) 0
Monterrey win 5-0 on aggregate

Feb 12 – Zapopan
Guadalajara (Mex) 3 (Beltran 22, Hernandez 55, Gonzalez 78)
Cibao (Dom) 0
Guadalajara win 4-1 on aggregate

Feb 12 – San Nicolas de los Garza
UANL (Mex) 3 (Herrera 2, Lainez 14, Vigon 85)
Real Esteli (Nca) 0
Tigres UANL win 3-1 on aggregate

Feb 13 – Mexico City
Pumas UNAM (Mex) 2 (Martinez 53, 74)
Cavalry (Can) 0
Pumas UNAM win 3-2 on aggregate

Feb 25 – Los Angeles
LAFC (USA) 1 (Delgado 49)
Colorado Rapids (USA) 0
2-2 on aggregate. LAFC win on away goals

Feb 25 – Fort Lauderdale
Inter Miami (USA) 3 (Messi 19, Allende 45+1, Suarez 45+3)
Sporting Kansas City (USA) 1 (Rodriguez 63)
Inter Miami win 4-1 on aggregate

Feb 26 – Seattle
Seattle Sounders (USA) 3 (De la Vega 24, 88, Arriola 53)
Antigua GFC (Gua) 1 (Galvez 45+2)
Seattle Sounders win 6-2 on aggregate

Feb 26 – Cincinnati
FC Cincinnati (USA) 1 (Denkey 19)
Motagua (Hon) 1 (Auzmendi 10)
FC Cincinnati win 5-2 on aggregate

Feb 26 – Sandy
Real Salt Lake (USA) 1 (Ajago 26)
Herediano (Crc) 2 (Aguilar 70, Vega 90+9 pen)
Herediano win 2-1 on aggregate

Feb 27 – Vancouver
Vancouver Whitecaps (Can) 2 (White 46, 90+1)
Saprissa (Crc) 0
Vancouver Whitecaps win 3-2 on aggregate

GRENADA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Paradise (C)	18	18	0	0	64	8	54
St John's	18	11	4	3	45	26	37
Queens Park Rangers	18	11	1	6	34	22	34
Hurricanes	18	10	3	5	39	27	33
Camerhogne	17	9	3	5	45	24	30
SAB Spartans	18	6	3	9	32	50	21
Shamrock	17	6	2	9	34	35	20
Hard Rock	18	5	2	11	31	46	17
Fontenoy United (R)	18	2	2	14	18	39	8
Mt Rich (R)	18	1	0	17	21	86	3

AFRICA

2024-25 CAF CONFEDERATION CUP

Quarter-Finals

Stellenbosch (RSA) v Zamalek (Egy); ASEC Abidjan (Civ) v RS Berkane (Mar); CS Constantine (Alg) v USM Alger (Alg); Al Masry (Egy) v Simba (Tan)
First legs on April 2, second legs on April 9 with group winners playing at home for return ties

OCEANIA

2024-25 OFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Preliminary Qualifying Group

Feb 8 – Matavera
Royal Puma (Asa) 0
Vaipuna (Sam) 4 (Faafoi 15, 25, Viliamu 45+1, Lesatele 63)

Feb 11 – Matavera
Royal Puma (Asa) 3 (Collins 26, 37, Fe'a 84)
Tupapa Maraerenga (Tca) 3 (Harmon 14, Matapo 29, 45+3 pen)

Feb 14 – Matavera
Vaipuna (Sam) 1 (Lesatele 9)
Tupapa Maraerenga (Tca) 2 (McCoy 27, 45+3)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
T. Maraerenga*	2	1	1	0	5	4	4
Vaipuna	2	1	0	1	5	2	3
Royal Puma	2	0	1	1	3	7	1

Qualify for finals

Internationals

2024-25 UEFA NATIONS LEAGUE

Quarter-Finals
Mar 20: Netherlands v Spain; Croatia v France; Denmark v Portugal; Italy v Germany
Mar 23: Spain v Netherlands; France v Croatia; Portugal v Denmark; Germany v Italy

League A-B Promotion-Relegation Play-Offs
Mar 20: Turkey v Hungary; Ukraine v Belgium; Austria v Serbia; Greece v Scotland
Mar 23: Hungary v Turkey; Belgium v Ukraine; Serbia v Austria; Scotland v Greece

League B-C Promotion-Relegation Play-Offs
Mar 20: Kosovo v Iceland; Bulgaria v Republic of Ireland; Armenia v Georgia; Slovakia v Slovenia
Mar 23: Iceland v Kosovo; Republic of Ireland v Bulgaria; Georgia v Armenia; Slovenia v Slovakia

2024-25 CONCACAF NATIONS LEAGUE

Finals
Mar 20: Canada v Mexico, USA v Panama
Mar 23: Third-place play-off & final

2025 CONCACAF GOLD CUP PRELIMS

Mar 21: Belize v Costa Rica; St Vincent & the Grenadines v Jamaica; Bermuda v Honduras; Guyana v Guatemala; Cuba v Trinidad & Tobago; Suriname v Martinique; Guadeloupe v Nicaragua
Mar 25: Costa Rica v Belize; Jamaica v St Vincent & the Grenadines; Honduras v Bermuda; Guatemala v Guyana; Trinidad & Tobago v Cuba; Martinique v Suriname; Nicaragua v Guadeloupe

2027 ASIAN CUP QUALIFIERS

Third Round

Group A
Mar 25: Tajikistan v Timor-Leste; Philippines v Maldives
Jun 10: Philippines v Tajikistan; Timor-Leste v Maldives
Oct 9: Timor-Leste v Philippines; Tajikistan v Maldives
Oct 14: Philippines v Timor-Leste; Maldives v Tajikistan
Nov 18: Maldives v Philippines; Timor-Leste v Tajikistan
Mar 31, 2026: Tajikistan v Philippines; Maldives v Timor-Leste

Group B
Mar 25: Lebanon v Brunei; Bhutan v Yemen
Jun 10: Brunei v Bhutan; Yemen v Lebanon
Oct 9: Brunei v Yemen; Lebanon v Bhutan
Oct 14: Yemen v Brunei; Bhutan v Lebanon
Nov 18: Brunei v Lebanon; Yemen v Bhutan
Mar 31, 2026: Bhutan v Brunei; Lebanon v Yemen

Group C
Mar 25: India v Bangladesh; Singapore v Hong Kong
Jun 10: Bangladesh v Singapore; Hong Kong v India
Oct 9: India v Singapore; Bangladesh v Hong Kong
Oct 14: Hong Kong v Bangladesh; Singapore v India
Nov 18: Hong Kong v Singapore; Bangladesh v India
Mar 31, 2026: India v Hong Kong; Singapore v Bangladesh

Group D
Mar 25: Thailand v Sri Lanka; Chinese Taipei v Turkmenistan
Jun 10: Sri Lanka v Chinese Taipei; Turkmenistan v Thailand
Oct 9: Thailand v Chinese Taipei; Sri Lanka v Turkmenistan
Oct 14: Turkmenistan v Sri Lanka; Chinese Taipei v Thailand
Nov 18: Sri Lanka v Thailand; Turkmenistan v Chinese Taipei
Mar 31, 2026: Thailand v Turkmenistan; Chinese Taipei v Sri Lanka

Group E
Mar 25: Myanmar v Afghanistan
Jun 10: Afghanistan v Syria
Oct 9: Syria v Myanmar
Oct 14: Myanmar v Syria
Nov 18: Afghanistan v Myanmar
Mar 31, 2026: Syria v Afghanistan

Group F
Mar 25: Vietnam v Laos; Nepal v Malaysia
Jun 10: Laos v Nepal; Malaysia v Vietnam
Oct 9: Vietnam v Nepal; Laos v Malaysia
Oct 14: Malaysia v Laos; Nepal v Vietnam
Nov 18: Laos v Vietnam; Malaysia v Nepal
Mar 31, 2026: Vietnam v Malaysia; Nepal v Laos

2025 UNDER-20 SOUTH AMERICAN CHAMPIONSHIP

Group A

Jan 23 – Barquisimeto
Peru 1 (Goicochea 20)
Paraguay 2 (Kmet 26 pen, Fernandez 72)

Jan 23 – Barquisimeto
Venezuela 1 (Andrade 45+5)
Chile 2 (Rossel 34, 40)

Jan 25 – Barquisimeto
Chile 1 (Ramos 16)
Uruguay 2 (Machado 8, Rossel 90+6 og)

Jan 25 – Barquisimeto
Peru 0
Venezuela 4 (Tamayo 13, Arias 66 og, Rodriguez 81, Vegas 89)

Jan 27 – Barquisimeto
Chile 3 (Vasquez 12, Rossel 86, 90+3)
Peru 2 (Soyer 24, Goicochea 53)

Jan 27 – Barquisimeto
Uruguay 6 (Severo 14, Petit 26, 31, Machado 62, Crucci 67, Barbas 75)
Paraguay 0

Jan 29 – Barquisimeto
Uruguay 2 (Machado 6, Pacifico 13)
Peru 0

Jan 29 – Barquisimeto
Paraguay 1 (Alfonso 42)
Venezuela 0

Jan 31 – Barquisimeto
Venezuela 1 (Andrade 59 pen)
Uruguay 0

Jan 31 – Valencia
Paraguay 2 (Paoli 35, A. Aguayo 57)
Chile 1 (Ramos 69)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Uruguay (Q)	4	3	0	1	10	2	9
Paraguay (Q)	4	3	0	1	5	8	9
Chile (Q)	4	2	0	2	7	7	6
Venezuela	4	2	0	2	3	3	6
Peru	4	0	0	4	11	11	0

Group B

Jan 24 – Valencia
Bolivia 1 (Rojas 25)
Ecuador 2 (Arroyo 51, Obando 54)

Jan 24 – Valencia
Brazil 0
Argentina 6 (Subiabre 6, Echeverri 8, 54, Igor Serrote 11 og, Ruberto 52, Hidalgo 78)

Jan 26 – Valencia
Bolivia 1 (Centella 47)
Brazil 2 (Gabriel Moscardo 14, Breno Bidon 28)

Jan 26 – Valencia
Argentina 1 (Echeverri 36)
Colombia 1 (Perea 33)

Jan 28 – Valencia
Argentina 1 (Rodriguez 86)
Bolivia 0

Jan 28 – Valencia
Colombia 1 (N. Villarreal 41)
Ecuador 0

Jan 30 – Valencia
Colombia 3 (N. Villarreal 2, Gonzalez 14, Montano 86)
Bolivia 2 (Rojas 60, Rodriguez 90+4)

Jan 30 – Valencia
Ecuador 2 (Obando 76, Paez 84 pen)
Brazil 3 (Iago 25, Deivid 27, 45+1)

Feb 1 – Valencia
Brazil 0
Colombia 1 (N. Villarreal 47)

Feb 1 – Barquisimeto
Ecuador 0
Argentina 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Colombia (Q)	4	3	1	0	6	3	10
Argentina (Q)	4	2	2	0	8	1	8
Brazil (Q)	4	2	0	2	5	10	6
Ecuador	4	1	1	2	4	5	4
Bolivia	4	0	0	4	4	8	0

Final Stage

Feb 4 – Caracas
Chile 1 (Rossel 61)
Argentina 2 (Subiabre 35, Ruberto 42)

Feb 4 – Caracas
Uruguay 0
Brazil 1 (Pedro 74)

Feb 4 – Caracas
Colombia 4 (Barrera 14, N. Villarreal 31, 51, 71)
Paraguay 0

Feb 7 – Caracas
Colombia 0
Brazil 1 (Iago 6)

Feb 7 – Caracas
Uruguay 3 (Lavega 60, 75, Crucci 86)
Argentina 4 (Echeverri 38, 45+3, Carrizo 52, 69)

Feb 7 – Caracas
Paraguay 2 (Alfonso 55, Kmet 90+3)
Chile 1 (Arce 83)

Feb 10 – Caracas
Paraguay 1 (A. Aguayo 25)
Brazil 3 (Prado 15, Rayan 17, Santana 78)

Feb 10 – Caracas
Argentina 1 (Subiabre 86)
Colombia 0

Feb 10 – Caracas
Chile 1 (Roman 65)
Uruguay 1 (Rodriguez 45)

Feb 13 – Caracas
Paraguay 1 (Paoli 52)
Uruguay 0

Feb 13 – Caracas
Colombia 3 (Perea 30, N. Villarreal 50, Benitez 81)
Chile 1 (Romero 38)

Feb 13 – Caracas
Brazil 1 (Rayan 78)
Argentina 1 (Echeverri 40 pen)

Feb 16 – Puerto La Cruz
Uruguay 1 (Severo 13)
Colombia 3 (N. Villarreal 6, Gonzalez 15, Sarabia 39)

Feb 16 – Puerto La Cruz
Argentina 2 (Carrizo 52, 66)
Paraguay 3 (Kmet 30, Caballero 47, Leon 82)

Feb 16 – Puerto La Cruz
Brazil 3 (Deivid 73, Pedro 86, Ricardo Mathias 88)
Chile 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Brazil (C)	5	4	1	0	9	2	13
Argentina	5	3	1	1	10	8	10
Colombia	5	3	0	2	10	4	9
Paraguay	5	3	0	2	7	10	9
Uruguay	5	0	1	4	5	10	1
Chile	5	0	1	4	4	11	1

FRIENDLIES

Feb 7: Jamaica 1-0 Trinidad & Tobago
Feb 8: Chile 6-1 Panama
Feb 10: Jamaica 1-1 Trinidad & Tobago

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Michael Essien

Chelsea v Arsenal

2006-07 Premier League, Stamford Bridge

In the history of the Premier League rivalry between London giants Chelsea and Arsenal, few goals have been struck as sweetly as the Ghanaian midfielder's was when the two sides met back in December 2006...

"Every player loves to play in big games, especially derbies. When you are playing against your rivals, you don't want to lose. We were on a long run of home games without a defeat at the time we played against Arsenal in December 2006. It was a record.

We were the reigning champions but we had fallen behind Manchester United in the title race, so it was crucial not to come away from this one empty-handed. Losing to Arsenal at Stamford Bridge was something that would be hard for us to take.

They took the lead against the run of play in the 78th minute when Mathieu Flamini scored. But then I popped up with this incredible goal and it finished 1-1. We kept our home run going. It was a good feeling. You always want to compete with the best teams and against your rivals.

My goal was the sort of thing I don't think you can practise. It was just instinct. From the beginning of the move, I was not part of the build-up. I was just following the ball. Eventually, I saw Frank Lampard get the ball and I screamed for it. He laid it off and the first thing that came into my mind was: "Just hit it". So that's what I did, 30 yards from goal and with the outside of my right boot.

As a footballer, you know when you hit a good one – you can feel it. So I knew it was a good strike, and then it hit the net. It wasn't something I practised or planned to do. It was just an instant that happened in that moment in time.

You can practise shooting from distance, but it's just something that can happen in a game. I am a coach now with FC Nordsjaelland in the Danish league. With our style of play, you can't really shoot from far out like I used to. If you hit one and you score, you have license to do it. If not, you're not doing it any more!

We were very unlucky not to win this game against Arsenal. We created lots of chances. I had one shot cleared off the line by Cesc Fabregas and then, in stoppage time, I hit the crossbar. Nobody talks about it, but I was right in front of the goal. When the ball eventually came to me, I didn't know what to do. I just hit it and I missed.

We pushed them right until the end and we were so close to winning it. Frank Lampard hit the post too. Keeping our unbeaten home record was very important for the team, even if we didn't get the three points that we wanted.

Scourge of Arsenal ...Essien scored two Premier League goals against the Gunners

Midfield battle... Essien challenges his fellow goalscorer Mathieu Flamini

> "Frank Lampard laid it off and the first thing that came into my mind was: 'Just hit it'"

Scoring a goal like this against your rivals, it's always going to be a favourite one. I scored some nice goals in my career, but that would be my number one, for sure."

Interview by Ryan Baldi

pitch

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